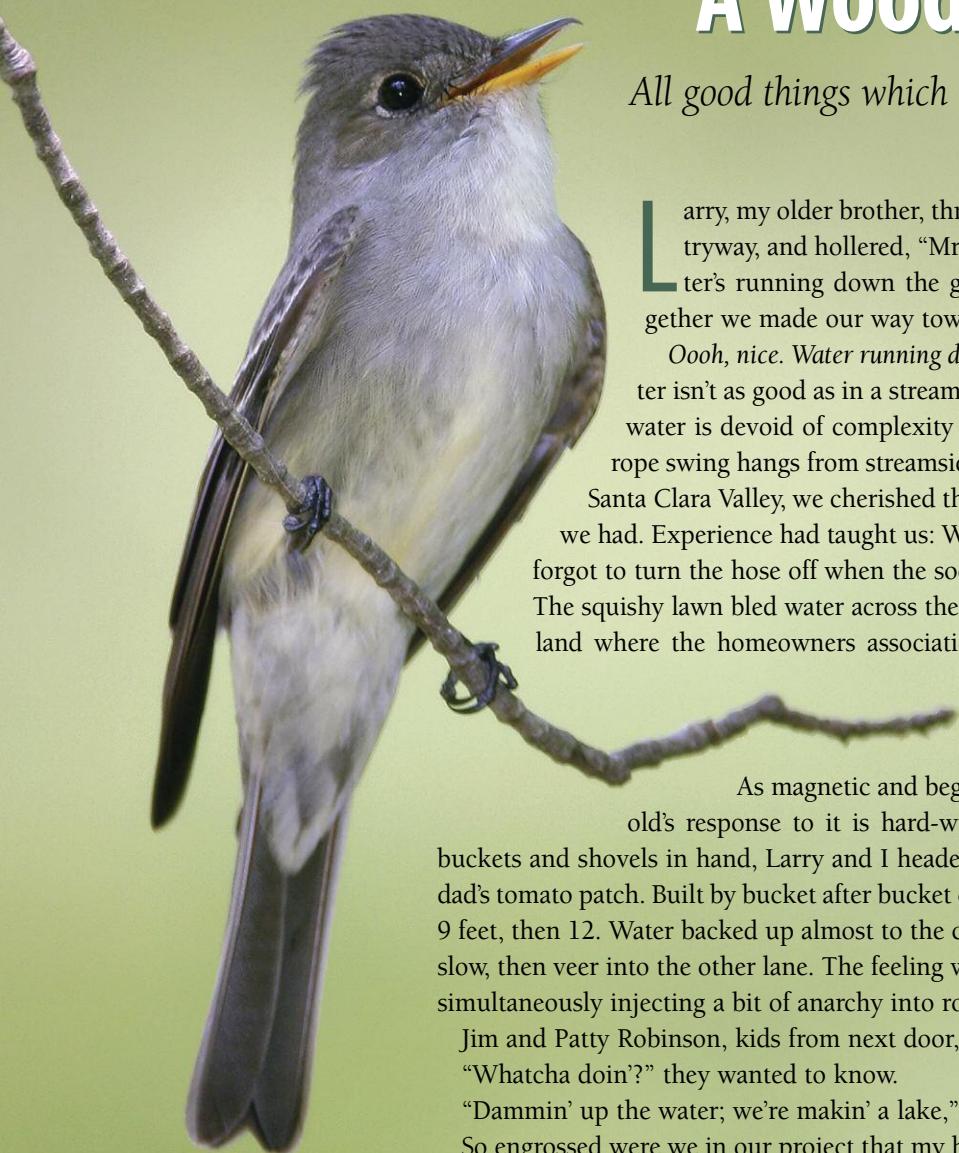


# A Wood-Pewee's Gift

*All good things which exist are the fruits of originality.*

— John Stuart Mill, 1859



Larry, my older brother, threw open the front door, ran onto the tile entryway, and hollered, “Mr. Wender’s watering his lawn again. The water’s running down the gutter.” I bounded down the stairs, and together we made our way toward the street.

Oooh, nice. Water running down the gutter. Now, granted, water in a gutter isn’t as good as in a streambed. Although it shimmers and glistens, the water is devoid of complexity or sinuosity. It shelters no bugs or fish. No rope swing hangs from streamside trees. But within our sterile suburb in the Santa Clara Valley, we cherished the occasional faux creek because it was what we had. Experience had taught us: When Mr. Wender watered his lawn, he often forgot to turn the hose off when the sod had become saturated.

The squishy lawn bled water across the sidewalk, flood-irrigated the 8-foot-wide island where the homeowners association had planted gingko trees, and tumbled down the face of the curb into the gutter. We couldn’t believe our good fortune. “Let’s get to work,” I said.

As magnetic and beguiling as flowing water might be, a 10-year-old’s response to it is hard-wired, Pavlovian: We wanted to dam it. So, buckets and shovels in hand, Larry and I headed to the backyard to get some soil from my dad’s tomato patch. Built by bucket after bucket of soil, our dam lengthened: first 3 feet, then 9 feet, then 12. Water backed up almost to the center of the street. Approaching cars had to slow, then veer into the other lane. The feeling was intoxicating: taming the elements, while simultaneously injecting a bit of anarchy into rote, by-the-book suburbia.

Jim and Patty Robinson, kids from next door, rode up on their bikes.

“Whatcha doin’?” they wanted to know.

“Dammin’ up the water; we’re makin’ a lake,” I replied.

So engrossed were we in our project that my brother and I never heard my mom open the front door. I think I was repairing a crack in the back side of the dam when my mom cut loose: “Pee-ah-wee! Peee-weeee!”

Jim and Patty snickered and rolled their eyes. Embarrassment stinging my face like a wind burn, I turned to my brother and muttered, “Time for dinner, Larry. Let’s go.”

I recall asking my mom several times about the, ah, song she used to call us home. She proved hard to pin down: I never received an adequate explanation of why she yelled out those seemingly meaningless syllables.

## Tom Leskiw

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**Eastern Wood-Pewee.**  
Summit County, Ohio; May  
2007. © Brian E. Small.



**Eastern Wood-Pewee.**  
Summit County, Ohio; May  
2007. © Brian E. Small.

Fast-forward 23 years, to 1987. The birding bug has bitten me. I'm playing a Roger Tory Peterson bird song LP, dubbing it to cassette tape so I can learn the contents. I may have missed the narrator's voice telling me the species name—"Eastern Wood-Pewee"—but the song hit me like a ton of bricks: *Pee-ah-wee! Peeeee-weeee*. My mind reeled, the room spun, and I fought for equilibrium. My mother's "All Leskiws come home" cry: She'd gotten it from a bird!

I grabbed *National Geographic's Field Guide to the Birds of North America* for clues as to why my mom had appropriated its song. Yes, the range of Eastern Wood-Pewee—*Contopus virens*—included several places where she'd once lived: Chicago, Illinois, and Grand Rapids, Michigan. I'd never considered my mom much of an outdoor person, but somewhere along the line, at least subliminally, she'd learned the wood-pewee's song. I phoned her, once again seeking an explanation. "Oh, my, it's been so long since I've called Ellen, Larry, Beth, or you home that way...I'm not really sure myself where it came from."

Fast-forward again, to 2009. My mom passed on nearly nine years ago, but I still periodically speculate on the events that furnished the inspiration for her "*Pee-ah-wee!*" Tonight, I consulted the species account for the Eastern Wood-Pewee in *The Birds of North America*, a joint project of the American Ornithologists' Union, the Cornell Lab of

Ornithology, and the Academy of Natural Sciences:

**Habitat:** Breeds in virtually every type of wooded community in the East, including both deciduous and coniferous forest.

**Vocal Array:** Combinations of 3 song patterns or forms. Song form 1 is a slurred *pee-ah-wee!* lasting approximately 4.5 seconds. Song form 2 is a plaintive *wee-oo* or *wee-ur*. Song form 3, a slurred *ah di dee*, is added to forms 1 and 2 during the "twilight song."

I can speak from experience when I say that nearly five seconds is an eternity when your mom is belting out song form 1 at the top her lungs, looking and sounding for all the world like a Common Porch Loon. You wither beneath the laser gaze and laughter of the neighborhood kids. All you can manage is a wry grimace and a silent prayer. *Why, oh why can't she just call us home like the other moms? "Paul and Bill, time for dinner! Ann and Joan, playtime's over. Come home!"*

But no, the Leskiw kids got summoned home the way we always had: *Pee-ah-wee! Peeeee-weeee!*

Sometimes, we sanitize our childhood memories, in this case glossing over the intense, relentless pressure in suburbs, small towns, and elsewhere—to fit in. My mother's method of calling the Leskiw chicks back to the nest was



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quirky; no other family we'd met employed anything even remotely similar. Back in the day, her "vocal stylings" caused my siblings and me much embarrassment. But I feel different about it today. We've grown so homogenized as a society: Colorful regional sayings and sage proverbs have fallen into disuse. Frequent interactions with our elders, in which they espouse bits of common sense, aren't nearly as common as they once were.

I'd hoped that my mother would be able to explain the inspiration for her "Calling all Leskiws" exhortations. Although she wasn't able to do so, a likely explanation comes to me. Birds have been, and continue to be, integral partners of the human community: as harbingers of the seasons; as agents of insect bio-control on crops and trees; as muses for poetry, literature, and song; and, more recently, as a metric for environmental health. Our appreciation for them is often at a level that circumvents the conscious mind—especially in people who don't consider themselves bird aficionados.

Today, when I reflect on the absolutely unique nature of my mom's "summoning style," it makes me proud—proud to have had a mother who embraced the maxim, "Forget about the others. Just Be Yourself." As Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed, "He is great who is what he is from nature and who never reminds us of others."

And if being yourself meant channeling a woodland bird, braying at the top of your lungs from your front porch, then so be it.

*Anybody who is any good is different from anybody else.*

— Felix Frankfurter, 1941

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