

What's That Bird Doing?

As I celebrate my 18th birthday today, I found myself doing something I've done countless times before, sitting quietly in the garden, warm tea in hand, watching the birds come and go. There's something about starting the day like this that never really changes, no matter what the day holds.

No big plans in that moment, although I'll be heading out to write an exam shortly, but for now, no rush. Just a bit of stillness to start the day. The kind of stillness where the world feels like it's waking up slowly around you, and you're lucky enough to notice it.

Maybe that's what made it feel a little different this morning. Not because anything out there had changed, but because I was sitting in it a little more intentionally. Letting the moment stretch just a bit longer, noticing the small movements, the soft calls, the familiar rhythm of a garden that's been quietly part of my life for years.

And I think, in that moment, it really hit me how lucky I've been. Not just to have grown up surrounded by this, but to have been able to do something with it. To take a love for the wild and turn it into something that reaches beyond just my own experiences. Through YWP, I've had the chance to be part of something bigger, something that connects people, tells stories, and hopefully, in some small way, makes a difference. Knowing it's almost YWP's 5th Anniversary, it's not something I take lightly.

Anyway...

For quite some time now, a single Southern Masked Weaver has returned to our garden season after season. Always alone, always busy, always with the same unmistakable quirk, a single tail feather sticking out at an odd angle like a flag that had given up on fitting in. That tail gave him away every time, and so we named him Piet. Why Piet? I couldn't tell you. Maybe he looked like a Piet. Maybe it just stuck. But what really stuck was Piet himself, his persistence, his craft, and the endless wonder he stirred in me.

This morning, my mom did what she always does, turning the feeder into what can only be described as a five-star bird buffet. She stood there having her usual chat with the birds, as if they were just another extension of the family. And honestly, the birds seemed to respond. One weaver in particular, bright yellow and chattering away in the tree above her, seemed completely engaged in the conversation.

It was Piet.

He had arrived, as he always did, with a mission, to fill his belly and maybe show off a bit while he was at it. But watching him there, I didn't just see a bird waiting for his turn at the feeder. I saw a mind ticking. And suddenly, the question hit me: What is that bird thinking? Not in a silly cartoon voice-over way, but actually, what goes through his head when he goes about his day?

I watched Piet flutter down and begin pecking at seeds like it was an Olympic sport. But what I really wanted was to get inside his head during nesting season. If you've ever seen a

Southern Masked Weaver build, you'll know what I mean. It's an architectural marvel, a perfect ball of woven grasses, hung upside-down like a green lantern. And they do this all with their beaks and feet, no blueprints, no second opinions, just instinct and grit.

But how does Piet choose the strand? Is it trial and error or something more deliberate? And when he finds the perfect thread of dry grass, how does he know where to tuck it in next? He doesn't measure or sketch or plan ahead, he just builds, one piece at a time, until he decides it's done. Or at least, he thinks it's done.

And then comes the real test, inviting a female over.

Imagine that. You spend days building what you believe is the avian equivalent of a luxury penthouse, only to have your guest arrive, glance around, maybe poke it once or twice, and shake her head before flying off. That's it. No explanation, no second chance. Just a flat-out no. And then, as if the heartbreak wasn't enough, Piet doesn't sulk or beg or try to redecorate. He just... destroys it. Snips the nest down himself and starts over. From scratch.

No salvaging the materials. No, that piece of grass is now useless. Back to zero. Again. And again. And again.

I started to wonder what must go through his mind during those moments. Does he feel disappointment? Frustration? Is there a sense of failure or is it just business as usual, another day, another bundle of grass? When we get rejected, we overthink and replay it in our heads for hours. But what about Piet? Does he even think of it as rejection? Or is it just the next step in the process?

And then, what about success?

Eventually, one female will step inside, give the place a satisfied chirp, and decide it's good enough to raise a family. What then? Does Piet puff out his chest with pride? Does he do a little celebratory jig when no one's looking? Or is that victory short-lived, lost in the next task, the next meal, the next stretch of life?

It's easy to brush animals off as instinct-driven, unemotional beings, but the more time I spend watching them, the less I believe that. Maybe they don't think in words or long stories the way we do, but surely there's something happening in that little feathered head. There has to be. How else do you explain the dedication, the resilience, the precision?

And maybe that's why this morning felt the way it did. Not because of anything big or dramatic, but because moments like this remind you how much there is to notice if you just sit still long enough.

I sat wondering what Piet makes of our garden, our feeder, my mom's chatter, the rising sun, the feel of wind on his wings. Wondering if he sees us as part of his world the way we see him in ours.

And maybe, just maybe, Piet's thinking the same thing about me.

"What's that human doing?"