

## Should Bird watching While Driving Be Outlawed?© 2020, Neil A. Case

July 1<sup>st</sup>, a few days ago, it became Indiana law that holding a cell phone in your hand, using the phone while driving, was illegal. It distracts the driver, reduces his or her attention to the road, the traffic. As I was driving, and thinking of that law, I thought of something I was doing that distracted me from the road and traffic, something I do whenever I'm in my car on the road, driving. I watch for birds.

Few of the birds I see while I'm driving are in the road. They're soaring overhead or

perched on a power line or they're on a fence by the road or perched in a tree or on the ground in a field beside the road. This morning, for example, as I drove into town, I saw two mourning doves on the power line and a kestrel. I saw a meadowlark on the fence by the road and was especially pleased to see it. Meadowlarks have become quite uncommon.

I saw a red-tailed hawk perched on a limb of a tree by the road. I saw a killdeer in a field by the road. I saw



three little brown birds, sparrows no doubt, but I couldn't tell what kind of sparrows without stopping and maybe I couldn't have told even if I had stopped. Little brown birds, LBJs, are the bane of bird watchers. I saw several turkey vultures circling in the sky overhead and a great blue heron fly across the sky. I saw starlings.

How much did my looking for birds, making mental note of the birds I saw as I drove into town this morning, detract from my a driving? If I had stopped would the driver behind me, another bird watcher perhaps, also have been distracted and rear-ended me?

Mother taught me to drive. It was World War II and Dad was away in the Army. Mother frequently admonished me when we were out on a country road and I was driving. "There was a dickcissel," I'd say and Mother would respond, loudly, "Neil Case, watch the road!" I never had another driver run into me, nor ran into another driver, but I went off the road a few times. Occasionally I had to walk to the nearest farm house and ask a farmer to come out with his tractor and pull me back on the road. Two mourning doves and a kestrel, a meadowlark, a red-tailed hawk and a killdeer, three LBJs, turkey vultures and a great blue heron, not many birds actually. And that's something else. So few birds seen are evidence of decline in bird numbers. There aren't as many birds as there used to be, certainly not as many as there were when Mother taught me to drive.

While most species of birds have declined, some species have increased. I didn't see an eagle on that drive a few mornings ago but bald eagles have increased. I never saw an eagle, bald or golden, when I was young. Now I see a bald eagle regularly and I've seen a golden eagle occasionally.

Sandhill cranes have increased, greatly. I never saw a sandhill crane when I was young. Now, if I go to places where they gather in the fall or where they spend the winter, I can see flocks of them, hundreds of them, thousands.

Wild turkeys have increased. That's another bird I never saw when I was young and now see regularly. Just a few days ago my older daughter spotted a turkey with four or five poults and pointed them out to me. We weren't driving. My daughter saw those birds from a front window of our house, across the road from our home.

Should looking for birds, bird watching while driving, be outlawed like using a cell phone, holding it in your hand, while driving?



Sandhill Cranes (Nathan Maculey)