

# The Chilean Songbird that Soundtracks the Prairie

I'm lucky to have grabbed a shot of my neighbor last night. The dickcissels behind our place are not particularly rare, and I love having them back again when they arrive in early summer. They're no bigger than a parakeet, and the endless ratcheting they make seems to make them almost akin. To call what they do "singing" is a stretch. It's a bleat, rough and horse, nothing like the robins' varied melodies.

Their goofy name—dickcissel--derives from the great ceaseless noise they put up: "dick-cissel-cissel-cissel." Something like that. Cornell Bird Lab says their hardcore bleat is the "soundtrack of the American prairies." That's them, and that's us.

The one I got into my camera was a female, although calling gender with birds is as perilous as it is with human beings. The male has a golden chest and a regal, almost monarchical crest, which makes them look like miniature meadowlarks, which, by the way, we've never seen out back. Love to, but the likelihood of picking up their songs increases only as you drive west.

Most every year we've lived out here we've been blessed by a pair, at least, of dodgy little dickcissels. They're so tiny it's impossible to believe they hoof it all the way to South America for winter. I'm not making that up. Bird lovers claim that dickcissels pick up stakes mid-August to begin their trek, usually teaming up in impossible numbers. When, finally, they arrive in South America, late September or October, they gather with a million others.

Those are some serious numbers--imagine the noise. Amazing little things really--little frequent flyers who pull on Superman suits and fly across the world. Where do they carry their passports.

When I say I'm lucky to have got a picture, I mean they come from the factory in all-over camo that makes them hard to spot even though they're gutsy little chirpers who

don't spook. You've got to get up relatively close before they take wing, but then ours seem rarely to leave our outback.

Their diet is less than desirable—most species of bugs for appetizers, grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, beetles as entrees. If you find that disgusting, go ahead and slap the multitudes these little fritters devour in a week.

When they're filling a prairie landscape with that noise of theirs, the best place to look is high places. Last night this young lady staked out some territory high atop one of the quaking aspens, making all kinds of noise despite the fact that I was right there, poking around with a camera. Still, it took me five minutes to find her, but then she wasn't a dime's worth bigger than the aspen leaves all around. There she was, riding the top branches, distinguished only by occasional movements.

Just like that, she left, but kept on singing. I walked out back after her, following all that scratchy noise. Took me some time, but I spotted her again at the farthest end of the acreage riding some spiny weed whose name I don't know--again, barely visible.

I dream of an occasional bobolink out back, but I think I need more ground to attract them. Once upon a time I saw a couple along the Big Sioux in a broad stretch of prairie at Blood Run. A bobolink would be a beauty of a blessing. So would a meadowlark.

But having this little lady and her beau around for a chunk of summer is its own rich reward. Come late spring, I look forward to their showing up, as they must after yet another endless pilgrimage. They're the only South Americans I've got in the backyard and the fact is, I've even grown to like their ratchet-y song. They're a tiny bird with a big voice and a tongue-twisting name: dickcissel.

Maybe today I'll see if I can get a shot of her royal beau.