



Staten Island Advance

Arden Heights neighborhood 'under attack'

Mockingbirds, protecting a nest, have disrupted the daily routine on Woehrle and Waring avenues

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On languid summer days in this Arden Heights neighborhood, barefoot teens play touch football in the street and retirees lounge on their stoops, calling out greetings to each other.

But the tranquil patterns of life shifted near the intersection of Woehrle and Waring avenues, after angry invaders moved in.

A family of aggressive mockingbirds settled into the shrubs and trees surrounding the tidy townhomes. In an effort to protect the young in their nests, the slate-gray birds with white under their wings have taken to dive-bombing from the sky and drilling toward people and pets with menacing speed.

Although bird experts say they are not dangerous, their avian antics have caused people heading to their front doors to cower in their cars until the coast is clear and to keep their children inside.

"I'm a 50-year-old man and I'm thinking I'm afraid to get out of my car?" asked Phil Fox, who lives on Woehrle Avenue and had to fend off the birds several times last week. "There were people running down the street with a baby carriage, trying to get away."

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

As he talked, his neighbors gathered around him, folded their arms over their chests and cast nervous glances into the air.

At first, they said, they scoffed at their husbands, wives and neighbors when they heard reports of encounters with the aggressive birds. However, after feeling gusts of wind from flapping wings at the backs of their own necks, their stories changed.

"My neighbor told me and I said, 'Naaah.' I thought he was nuts," said Barbara Piscitelli, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than 30 years. "Then I went outside and they swooped right down and you could feel it. I never saw antagonistic birds like that in my life except when the dump was here, but those were gulls."

Four city agencies -- Animal Care and Control, Health Department, Community Assistance Unit and the Mayor's Management Office -- have come out to the neighborhood; however, officials say not much can be done.

"We found exactly what the animal experts are saying. Birds were nesting and a nuisance but not a health hazard," said Patrick Brennan, the commissioner of the city's Community Assistance Unit. "Actually removing a nest of birds that are protected, you enter a lot of gray territory."

AGGRESSIVE, HARMLESS

Mockingbirds are notoriously aggressive in defending their hatchlings, said Tom Brown, a professor of biology at the College of Staten Island who specializes in ornithology.

"Although it may be disturbing to many people to have a bird diving at them, mockingbirds will not be able to harm you in any way," he said. "They don't have talons to tear your skin and their beak is not designed to tear flesh or to bite with pressure."

In recent years, the mockingbird population has mushroomed on Staten Island and throughout the Northeast, due in part to urban development and deforestation, he said.

The birds thrive in residential areas with trimmed-back lawns, where non-native shrubs produce food for them during fall and winter months.

The Southern species of mockingbird also has been very successful in reproducing, and as average winter temperatures increase due to global warming, the birds potentially could be moving to more-northerly latitudes, he said.

"I would advise anyone who is being 'harassed' by mockingbirds to just ignore them," he said, adding that birds terrorizing the neighborhood are probably from one family, as pairs do not nest near each other. "These birds are defending a perceived threat to their young, not unlike a human would do in defending their own young."

VENGEANCE IS THEIRS

Mockingbirds are also unique in their ability to remember intruders and seek revenge, said Brown.

That is not news to Dennis Pennacchio. Two weeks ago, to get rid of the mockingbirds' nest, he cut down the shrubs that have grown in the front yard of his Waring Avenue home for 25 years.

"What I seen here is they're working in pairs," he said with the tone of someone speaking of criminals. "One will sit up on the people and you're watching him, figuring he's going to be the one that comes down on you, and the other one comes out from behind the house."

Nikki DeRosa kept her 2- and 5-year-olds inside one day when the school bus came because they feared the winged harassment.

"I never saw such antagonistic birds like that," she said. "It's crazy."

It has been rumored in the neighborhood that trash pickup and mail delivery were stopped because of the menacing creatures, but spokesmen for the U.S. Postal Service and city Sanitation Department said their records show service has not been interrupted.

"If there are Alfred Hitchcock-type mockingbirds in that area, it's not affecting our service to the people," said Matthew LiPani, a Sanitation spokesman.

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