

A Greener View: Gray catbirds love to dine in raspberry bushes

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: I was in my yard picking raspberries and I noticed a small gray bird following me making a soft mewling sound, similar to a kitten. It didn't attack and it didn't appear to be afraid of me.

Was it complaining that I was taking its food? I have never seen birds eating raspberries and the plants have been there for years. I don't remember a time when some were missing as though animals had eaten them. I would put up a bird feeder if it would help.

A: It sounds like you had an encounter with a gray catbird. They range across the whole country, except for the dry southwestern states, where the mockingbird takes its place. The catbird is gray except for a black cap and tail and a rusty red under the tail area. It is a mimic that can sing a song filled with quite a variety of notes, but it can also make other sounds including a soft cat mewling, which gives the bird its name.

Catbirds are common, but not seen very often because they like to live in the thickest parts of the landscape. They nest in dense shrubs and your raspberry patch may just be such an area. It is also possible that there were young birds recently out of the nest, and this was a parent bird telling them to lay low while you were nearby.

The mewling sound is a call note. Many birds have call notes that are used to warn other birds of the presence of people or predators. Call notes tend to be soft and high pitched because it is harder to pinpoint a source for them. Birds do understand the warning call notes of other bird species and will come to join in yelling at predators like a cat. They freeze motionless when they hear the warning for an avian predator.

I am not sure why your raspberries are not being devoured, since catbirds and other bird species like robins or finches will eat berries. I don't think the catbird was concerned about the missing berries as much as your presence, especially if babies or the nest were nearby.

Q: I don't understand why, but my local water district has put my area on a watering schedule. We have lived here for more than 10 years and I am finally getting my yard fixed up. I don't water my yard all that often, but I do want to keep my newly planted shrubs alive.

Why do they do this, don't they understand that the plants need water and I have a lot of money invested in them?

A: Unfortunately, you are stuck. Many areas of the country are in drought situations. Some people live in fast-growing areas where new homes are being built faster than water towers and reservoirs. Some areas have used so much underground water that wells are going dry. Although the rivers are being cleaned up, they don't have unlimited amounts of water. Even if you have plenty of water, it is just wasting your own money to let it leak away down the drain. Water is not just for drinking, it is also for firefighting.

Watering outside the house is easy to monitor, so it is easy to regulate. The American Water Works Association estimates that nationally 50 to 70 percent of water use is indoors, yet it is rarely regulated or monitored. More than 30 percent of all water use in the home is from leaks and toilets; therefore, by fixing leaks and reducing flushing a lot of water can be saved. A dripping faucet can waste 2,000 gallons of water a year and a leaky toilet can waste as much as 200 gallons per day.

If you don't have a water-conserving toilet, add a couple of glass bottles to the tank. This way the water is held in them and not flushed. Don't use the toilet to flush away facial tissues or other items that can be thrown away. Turning off the water while brushing your teeth can save 5 to 10 gallons of water a day.

The washing machine is the second largest user of water in a home. Energy Star rated newer washers use as little as half as much water as older machines.

Watering will be necessary to keep your newly planted shrubs alive. They will need less water as lawn areas once they are established, but they need to be watered for the first several years to get a large root system.

Don't over water them. Many people panic when they hear they can only water on certain days or at certain times, usually there is plenty of time to water and most plants don't need to be watered every day.

By all means, water every plant immediately if it is wilting due to lack of water. Most sets of rules allow for hand watering at anytime, so do it if necessary to keep your plants alive.

Use drip irrigation or a soaker hose to apply water slowly and directly to the soil, so there is almost no wasted water. Apply mulch around the shrubs to slow the loss of water to evaporation.

E-mail questions to Jeff Rugg at info@greenerview.com. Â© Copley News Service

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