



## Built by Birds

JULIA ROSEN

AT FIRST GLANCE, Hazeldale looks like any other park in suburban Portland. Its immaculate lawn—close-cropped and weed-free—glows green beneath the wooly Oregon sky. Its spacious grounds boast picnic tables, baseball diamonds, and a bustling off-leash dog area. It is the very picture of domestication, but that is about to change.

Recently, three clusters of odd metal trees sprouted along Hazeldale's paved paths. Their trunks are smooth and painted the colors of forest fruit. Their splayed branches, which tower a dozen feet off the ground, are spiked with tiny metal perches. If things go according to plan, they will someday host raucous crowds of blue jays, juncos, and cedar waxwings, which travel in great flocks and feast on berries.

All are potential agents of the slow revolution that Stacy Levy, the installation artist behind the project, hopes to incite. She built the towers to entice birds to perch and drop seeds that will transform this orderly suburban park into an unruly shrubland. She is trying to harness the power of ornithochory—the dispersal of seeds by birds—and its profound ecological implications.

Birds are vital allies of many plants; in tropical rainforests up to 90 percent of tree species rely on animals to ingest and spread their seeds. And researchers think that corvids like jays, which stash seeds in the ground, helped replant vast areas of North America and Europe wiped bare by glaciers at the end of the last ice age. Now Levy wants to show how these processes happen in our own backyards and neighborhood parks.

"I'm envisioning that birds will eat

some seeds from the forest edge here," she told me on a quiet afternoon, gesturing to a ribbon of woods along the park's western border, "and then come out and have a poo." That's where her towers come in—as aesthetically appealing bird bathrooms.

The Tualatin Hills Park and Recreation District commissioned the project as part of an initiative to foster connections between visitors and the environment in the parks it manages. Levy—whose work explores the intersection of science and art—was a natural fit for the project. Other projects she's designed have employed giant metal sequins to show how the wind blows, and vinyl flowers, mounted to pylons, that open and close with the tide.

Levy's decision to enlist avian helpers in this endeavor was inspired by a realization she had several years before, when she noticed trees and shrubs growing around flagpoles on her Pennsylvania farm. Someone explained to her that birds forage for seeds and then "perch and poo," a habit that has shaped the natural world for millions of years.

"Everyone is like, oh, bees are so industrious and beavers change the landscape—but birds really *make* the landscape," Levy says. "I think they should get some credit."

The structures at Hazeldale are part tribute and part experiment. Park staff will mow one set of structures, but they will leave the other two alone—interfering only to seed a few native plants and root out invasive species. Over the next few decades, locals will watch birds alter the landscape in ways that not even Levy can predict. "That's the whole point of this," says Kristin Atman, director of the district's interpretive programs. "It piques people's curiosity."

Instead of investing in interpretive displays to explain the natural processes at work in its parks, the district sought out projects that would embody them. Other installations they commissioned include one in which growing trees slowly shift giant slabs of rock and another in which

moss advances across granite sculptures.

The district reasoned that the majority of their park visitors don't come from far and wide. They are locals. They are frequent flyers. "That's one of my favorite audiences," says Levy. "They get something that accrues very slowly."

And this will. Levy used to be an urban forester, and she says it will take up to three years before any bird-sown shrubs can outcompete their herbaceous neighbors. After that, she hopes the plants will take off, which is why she installed one tower at every cluster with holes designed to accommodate movable pegs. She wants the spires to act like the doorjamb on which parents record the change in their children's height, but for vegetation.

"I'm hoping that if this is really successful, you will hardly see this project in fifteen years," she says. "It's a piece that erases itself by promoting what it promotes." ❧

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- ★ Hear Debbie Urbanski read "6 Compensations for Sleeplessness" aloud. (p. 4)

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