



## Tales from a Sisters Naturalist

by Jim Anderson

### The end of poor Charlotte

Doug Beall's fantastic photo and blurb in last week's *Nugget* of his ambitious and bold house wren opened the door to a discussion about "gleaners," those little feathered busy-bodies who never stop looking for and eating six- and eight-legged creatures from dawn to dark.

That photo is superb, both artistically and scientifically; it shows without any doubt why, for the past two years, I have not seen any adult orb-weavers outside my windows or stretched cross the back door in the morning. They are gone!

Now as you can imagine, that got to me somewhat — as most everyone knows I like spiders, those big orb-weavers polish off lots of insects that get into Sue's kitchen garden. But then, so do the gleaners.

House wrens, chickadees,

bushtits and nuthatches are "gleaners." If you're lucky enough to have them and have a few moments, do what Doug did and watch them at work. As he said, they're at it from dawn to dark, finding and eating arthropods. (I can't say "bugs" as all bugs are insects, but not all insects are "bugs," or spiders.)

If you live in the pines you have woodpeckers, and therefore you will have house wrens, nuthatches and chickadees; they use old woodpecker cavities to nest in. Or, if you put up bird nesting boxes near your place you'll have them gleaning for food all around your trees, shrubs, gardens and house.

Forget spraying anything for the control of insects, the gleaners will do it for free, saving you money—and the chances of causing biological problems with chemical spray. Using chemicals would be like biting the hand that feeds you.

Sue and I often eat our lunch and supper on the back deck. All during those meals we watch gleaners poking around under our eaves, happily doing insect control but at the same time removing "my" orb weavers as well.

Oh, yes, we can also add one more bird to the gleaners: hummingbirds. The

other day I watched a rufous going through a juniper with a fine-tooth comb out at Abbot Schindler's place.

Baby orb weavers fly around the countryside soon after they've hatched from that beautiful, big eggs mass mom has been guarding at the end of summer. Even when she dies she's still protecting them with her tired, worn-out body resting on top of the egg mass.

If young spiders don't leave their place of birth quickly they'll end up eating each other; so, to prevent fratricide from taking place they spread out. They climb to the top of a twig, roof or pole and begin letting out very light strands of sticky silk that forms a parachute, or balloon if you like. The warm breezes come wafting by and lift the silken parachute into the air, with tiny Charlotte attached to it, and away she goes.

When she (or he) lands on the side of a barn, your house, shrub or tree, it immediately builds a tiny silken orb web trap that will catch gnats, mosquitoes and smaller insects. Tiny Charlotte wraps them up, gives them the coup-de-gras and hangs them up in her larder to liquify. When she has enough to satiate herself she

spreads a little more venom on them which liquifies their hard outer bodies to the point where she can suck 'em into her stomach. Spiders do not have jaws or teeth with which to eat.

At our place, orb weavers don't stand a chance. Our house wrens are quick to find them, and if they don't get 'em, the nuthatches, hummers and chickadees will. Normally we wouldn't have nuthatches at our place, as we don't have any big pine for woodpeckers to dig out cavities after which nuthatches will use them for nesting, etc., etc.

But, I have a confession to make: I have nest boxes and a suet feeder up for my flickers, and the nuthatches, bushtits and chickadees take to that stuff like a duck to water. As do the goldfinches, wrens, bushtits, occasional house finch, and the



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

**Pygmy nuthatch waiting for that white-headed woodpecker to pry out a beetle larva for him.**

(expletive deleted) starlings.

Anyway, Doug's beautiful house wren photo — with the juvenile Charlotte going home to become food for the kids — triggered this hasty tale of how much Old Mother Nature is always helping us get rid of things we don't want around our house. Except in my case it proved to me that all those gleaners Sue and I love to watch are also gobbling up our poor Charlottes.

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