

Dear Students, Colleagues and Friends,

Happy Pi Day or Day to those of you recognizing March 14th as 3-14 (the first three numbers in pi). It really is a thing; and although pi is a favorite contemplative topic for me (We could talk Archimedes to Carl Sagan to Kate Bush on this.), today I'm really more concerned with pie.

Hello, yes, it's been since September and it's not that I haven't had anything to say, but that I've been busy with the book and a couple of other projects concerning Earth. Apologies for my absence! *(To my students) Congratulations on the new direction T.W. and good luck on the job acquisition S.L. I gave you a glowing report! It was also grand to see a number of you at biomimicry talks I've given in the interim! One more thing – I've been asked to teach biomimicry at the university again – but online. Please, give me your thoughts on learning this methodology online as opposed to in person. I know "online" is supposedly the future, but I'd like to hear what you think since you learned it in person.*

And now for the whole group -

Back to pie. I was walking up the driveway a few days ago when a flash of movement caught my eye. Crunching gravel signaled my halt as I tilted my head upward toward branches where sat a male robin eyeing me I believe, speculatively. In a low voice I assured him that I was simply trying to cross the drive to get to the other side. Instead of asking why, he continued with the baleful stare treatment. I padded softly by, averting my gaze until I got to my yard gate, then angled my head back. Apparently satisfied, he took flight over to a small group of compatriots which seemed to signal them collectively to brush their wings eastward. That poetic flight made me think the collective name for a group of robins ought to be a grace of robins. It's not; but I think it should be.

I had been thinking of this fellow in the days since when I ran across a startling article in entitled "[Why are big, insect-eating birds disappearing? Maybe we're running low on bugs.](#)" in *Anthropocene Magazine*. It noted a 3.5 percent annual drop in population in whip-poor-wills, an aerial insectivore responsible for many nights of me having to shove a pillow over my head at camp due to its repetitive call. You might think that a nuisance, but the idea of a population of, say, 100 birds dropping to 70 in 10 years when our grandchildren are camping (And then what in 20 when their children are camping?) fills me with gloom. But my sadness is of little concern here. I wouldn't trouble you for that. Here is the gist of my disquiet. Aerial insect eaters like whip-poor-wills, swallows and swifts are responsible for ridding us of a plethora of insect pests. Swallows alone eat upwards of [65 billion](#) insects a day. Our pest is their pièce de résistance.

So what? And why? Not a week goes by without a half dozen articles crossing my desk on the effects of climate change and, yet again, it was raised as a topic of concern here. But the greater worry by far is the effects caused by the use of neonicotinoids as insecticides. Used broadly on farms for insect control, neonics, as they're commonly called, are [insecticides](#) which are packaged in far greater concentrations for our home gardens – and here's what they do. When applied, the chemicals are absorbed and distributed throughout the plant making them unpalatable to insects. No, let's re-write that to represent the circumstances more accurately. When these commonly purchased neuroactives are applied to plants they harm or kill insects. Yes, that includes the bees pollinating your food crops. Yes, that includes the insects these aerial insectivores rely on for survival.

And yes, this includes my jaunty robin friend. He eats my pie cherries, which is where the pie comes into play and which I'm glad to share; but he also eats insects.

Neonics kill, it is true. When they don't, they can delay or hurry along pupation, which many times means when the birds return from migration – their food ain't there. And though we wring our hands then scrunch them on our hips, we're still short on taking decisive action. While we piddle about we've lost 33 percent of our [grassland birds](#) since the 1970's, with the increase in pesticide use being researched and found squarely to blame. And these chemicals are now leaching into our [waterways](#) as well. But the birds, oh the birds. With a decreasing size of and number in insects and a resulting decrease in bird numbers, we make ourselves complicit in their demise – and ever more reliant on chemicals to protect our plants. Forget pi for a moment. Is *this* really the equation for a healthy world? For a happy one?

But just as when Ms. Carson warned us of a [Silent Spring](#) due to DDT, we can also reverse our fortunes today by taking resolute steps now:

- **Refuse to use insecticides with neonics.** Yes, you need to read the label *and* I have a starter list of common insecticides containing neonics to avoid [here](#). To further avoid neonics, check out Dave Smitley's work on alternative measures [here](#).
- **Plant *native plants*!** They're gorgeous. They're adapted to your climate and they host a magnitude more insects [helpful for pollination](#), and feed birds and wildlife. People often think of native flowers when I say this, but native shrubs and trees are also beautiful and productive. Here are native plant lists for most of you: [Missouri](#), [Kansas City](#), [Tennessee](#), [California](#), [Oregon](#), [Montana](#), [Georgia](#), [South Carolina](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New York](#), [Ohio](#), [Illinois](#), [United Kingdom](#), [Canada](#)
- **Spread the word.** I know we don't like to intrude. We hesitate to interfere with each other's personal freedoms by asking each other *not* to do *anything*. But how about framing it this way: Let's come together to create and nurture a healthier planet for us and all living things by avoiding neonics and generously planting native plants.

Three little actions. That's all I ask. Oh, I just looked out the window and there he is – robin in my cherry tree. Happy pie days ahead!

To pi and pie,

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Give good people good information and they'll do good things.

(If you've just received this single newsletter, it may be because I thought you'd be interested in this particular subject. You may or may not get others. If you want on my list regularly, e-mail me. If you want off my list, e-mail me. Thanks!)