BIRD TAILS

One of the things I've come to love of living in this part of Florida is seeing our resident Sandhill Cranes—birds I never saw in the Northeast. I thought you might enjoy learning a little about them.

First of all (and this is my opinion only; I've never seen this documented in official research), these are the stupidest of all birds. They'll stand right in the middle of the street and stare you down; no fear, no thoughts that the CAR facing them just might be dangerous, no caution at all. (Even *squirrels* know to run!)

The males (and I'm guessing here; the sexes are identical) tend to be aggressive towards anything they see as a rival for their mate's affections:

car side mirrors or windows, sliding doors, shiny grill sides—if it reflects their own image, they see an opponent worthy of attack. I've seen them rip screens from windows or doors to get to the dastardly bird they believe inside.

The Cranes aren't too bright when it comes to nesting, either. They do give some thought (?) to nest site: They prefer peninsulas—water on three sides seems to make them feel safe from predators (as if snakes, gators, turtles don't exist…).

They lay 2 eggs, but on consecutive days, which means one chick (properly called a "colt") will be younger than the other

(and therefore smaller, weaker, more vulnerable). It usually takes exactly 28 days for each egg to hatch, but incubation can last longer. (Our last year's Lake Margaret egg took 32 days!)

Now here I'm going to exercise writer's privilege and for clarity's sake, name our pair: the male will be called "Idiot," and his ladylove, "Idiota."

Sandhills mate for life, but Idiota didn't choose wisely when she selected Idiot as her spouse.

Idiot did NOT do his part very well last year: he preferred to wander the parking lot or backyards, attacking cars and windows. He didn't like nest-sitting. I watched: he would fly in, have a look-see, and fly right off again. (Perhaps still a teenager?)

Idiota sat, and sat, and sat. During all that time, she dutifully rolled her eggs: because they are lying on mud or even shallow water, their bottoms get cold. The tops get hot. They have to be turned many times a day to even out the temperature. But being one of the notorious Southern, um..Idiots, she rolled one egg into the lake. Hasta la vista, potential offspring.

After 32 long, hot days in the sun, little Easter hatched, on Easter Sunday.

Mama was pretty good; she stayed right with him, teaching him how to catch bugs and worms, stay in shallow water, head for the nest at sunset. Idiot helped out with occasional supervision.

Now, one year later, the Idiot family will start looking for housing in late November, early December. But that won't include Easter. Idiot and Idiota will turn nasty. They'll run at him, yell at him, eventually convince him he's unloved and needs to leave. Those groups of Cranes you're seeing flying overhead right now are "bachelors," one-year juveniles, both male and female, who've been kicked out of the family and are hanging out together for company and solace. They'll fly around together for maybe a year before they finally pair-bond and start their own family.

It will be interesting to see where Idiot and Idiota nest. Lake Margaret's boundaries have shifted; there aren't as many protrusions as last year
(although the recent storm could have changed that). Usually these birds return to the same site year after year, and I hope they'll come back to us this winter. I feel privileged to have them in my backyard, and to see their
colts grow and develop—even if the brain trust is weak.

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