

# THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER

## KAREN ZHANG

HONORABLE MENTION Grades 8-9

### Balancing the Birds and the Mind



March 11, spring of 2020, the very day when the world as we knew it came to an end as New Mexico became the newest addition to the virus's collection of infected regions. The endless amount of emails that came flying in marked the beginning of this "new normal," one with limited freedom. Now stuck at home in the middle of a desert of boredom, we all had to find some way of keeping ourselves busy and I turned to birding, a hobby that I had discovered in 7th grade.

Inspired by the small birds of the family Trochilidae who came to feed at our feeder, I also took up the art of photography and aimed the camera at the class of Aves. While spending many hours of my free time watching the little birds fly in and out of my backyard, I learned to appreciate what little things the outdoors has to offer and the small feelings of joy that such magnificent creatures can bring. The hum of their fast-paced wings, the vibrant colors of the males, their high-pitched chirps; it was these small moments that had brought me happiness and appreciation for the things that nature had created.

During some summer mornings, my family and I would often go on walks near the Rio Grande. Accompanied by the chirps of the different hummingbird species and sounds of the flowing river, I finally realized the true meaning of the pandemic. *A river flows the way it desires, it doesn't stop if a rock is in front of it. It simply flows around it. Why should we have to mope about this pandemic when instead, we can flow around it with a positive mindset?*

Perhaps it isn't just the pandemic itself that brings feelings of despair, but the way our minds interpret the current situation. My mind is always filled with thoughts about being trapped at home and the restrictions that have been put into place when truthfully, the pandemic is bringing balance to us, between man and nature. It forced us to take a step back into familiar surroundings and appreciate how much we have and how fortunate we are to have the outdoors, the hummingbirds showing me these gifts themselves.

Though many species of birds pass through my backyard, the birding spot is nothing compared to Bosque del Apache, a favorite fall migration spot for Sandhill Cranes. Thousands of these cranes gather at the fields at sunset and multiple species of hawks can be found soaring high above the ground. Any one of these creatures can be found in the sky, their wings catching the evening winds and bringing them to any place they desire. The only thing that tethers them to the ground is their minds. Once balanced with a positive mindset and courage, the birds are free to fly as they wish. Despite the freedom that these birds possess, not all birds are fortunate enough to have the gift of long-distance flight. Unlike the birds of Bosque del Apache, the roadrunner travels using the ground, only taking flight when necessary, similar to how we only leave our homes when needed.

From a free hawk who soars in New Mexico's clear blue skies to a roadrunner who runs on the earth, we had to learn to respect and appreciate the many gifts of the outdoors. As the 11th of March approaches once again with the near return of life before the pandemic, it's time that we look at the world in a new way, one full of gratitude, taught by none other than the class of Aves.