

6-25-10 It's A Hard Time of Year

"It's a hard time of the year", the local famer/hay grower grand dame said as she saw me returning from some sort of wildlife rescue. She had seen me get out of my car and pick up something in the road. "Was it a turtle?" she asked as I returned to my car. I explained that it was a baby robin in the middle of the road. The new fledglings have short wings and tail, don't fly yet but are pretty good at hopping. Their parents stay in close contact with eyes and voice but the toddlers don't understand the big picture or the details. They just want to eat and while waiting for that next meal, they sometimes get impatient and begin to hop about.

Remind you of your own children when they were little ones? We have a lot in common with wildlife. Or they do with us. I don't know if birds think but if they are acting "only" on instinct, well, we, the human species, could use some more.

For the last few weeks, I've been watching robins build a nest and raise a family in my little walking stick tree. It has been wonderful, literally, to see the interactions and the events unfold.

The female robin builds the nest of grass and mud, using her feet to vigorously kick and stomp the inside to her exact specifications, somehow ending up with the same size and shape as all robin's nests, as though she was following a blueprint.

The mother literally bares her breast, as she sits on the eggs, her bare skin keeping the eggs warm enough to incubate. She covers them from rain. She leaves only to eat. She seemingly worked alone during the incubation period.

As soon as the eggs hatched, the father appeared, ready to assist with feeding, watching, and even housekeeping. I witnessed the father clean the nest while the mother preened and sunned on a nearby pine tree branch, looking down at her nest the whole time.

During all of this very busy time, father and mother spoke to each other often. There were different voices for different situations.

A catbird, having recently seen her little one fledge successfully, took on the role of aunt and sometimes visited the nest, and was always nearby, acting as another set of eyes.

I know I'm personifying but turning that around, to avian-ifying, and we could learn from them. For instance:

House building is hard work and following a good, tried and true set of plans is a good idea. Why reinvent the wheel?

Raising a family is a lot of work. It's better to share the load and work in pairs.

Life is too short for prejudice. Just because someone's skin is a different color, is no reason to deny them, shun them or refuse their help or friendship.

Communicate often and clearly.

Now, up until last Saturday, these were the lessons. As of 11:00 in the morning on June 19, add to that:

Watch your children, for there are predators.

When someone outside of the family suggests reason for concern, pay attention rather than be offended.

I was out in the yard, with my back to the walking stick tree. The father robin had been chirping extra loudly and more frequently that morning but I thought he was just being protective of his territory or even bragging. What do I know? I only turned around to look at the nesting area because I heard the catbird. I wondered what she was talking about and, so I turned, just in time to see a sharp shinned hawk take off with a baby (or two?) in its talons. The parents zoomed in, raising a ruckus and, along with the catbird, took off after the hawk, to no avail, of course. My screams were also to no avail, along with my search for little robins under the tree, for the nest was now empty.

No one will ever convince me that robins do not experience fury or outrage or grief or that catbirds do not offer some sort of social connection that is not based on species or obligation. The robins searched, sounded the alarm and then widened their search.

At ten to five, the catbird once again was alert and with the robins sounded the alarm. In the nearby birch tree sat the hawk looking at the nesting tree, hoping for dinner. Although he looked majestic as only birds of prey can and was seemingly unperturbed by the little protesters, he took off with the robins and catbird in hot pursuit.

The hawk was probably feeding its own nest of babies and if I had been watching them grow, I would have thought that was wonderful, too. That's another thing we can learn from animals. For them, killing is for survival. Humans, on the other hand, have such a variety of reasons for the act of ending another life. The whole world of humankind would be better off if we could live more like animals, instead of acting like them.

It is a difficult time of year, indeed.

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