Lesson from a Hawkless Day

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Throughout the morning they came, uniformly spaced squadrons of four to six ring-billed gulls, first tacking southward toward the Milwaukee skyline then, minutes later, sailing north, exploiting the same updrafts that had earlier expedited their southerly movement. Were they patrolling with the hope of spying a surface swimming sawbelly, or were they simply out for enjoyment, flaunting their prowess over the sky to the two of us planted so firmly on the solid ground of the cliff's edge? Whatever their reasons they must have been meaningful for those knowledgeable in the ways of gulldom. Yet, something struck me as odd about their behavior of alternating directions along an invisible flow of air that marked the transition between terra firma and the waves of Lake Michigan. It was only later that I understood this feeling of oddness. If this had been June, July, or even the middle of August I was sure that I wouldn't have had a second thought about the ring-bills' comings and goings in a moderate southeast wind. I would have probably marveled at their mastery of the air. But this was Labor Day Weekend, early September. I hadn't traveled to Lake Michigan to pay homage to the skills of silvery-winged gulls. I was there, even though all of my meteorological wisdom told me otherwise, to take part in the southward fall raptor migration along the undulating, western shoreline of Lake Michigan. I was there to join the raptors in a centuries old ritual welcoming fall and winter to the upper midwest. My head, filled with the wisdom of many years of schooling and of watching migrating hawks and their kin, told me that the raptors didn't "need" to move south this early in the migration season, especially against southerly winds. They needn't feel any urgency, northwest winds would come to reduce the effort necessary to traverse hundreds, or thousands of miles (in the case of the broad-winged hawks). Yet my heart and my spirit overruled the reasoned stance of my head. They told me that I might miss some raptors, the odd broad-wing or two, a sharp-shinned hawk or perhaps even an osprey. On this day the wisdom of schooled knowledge and experience mocked the feelings of the heart. There were no raptors where, even a week before there was a wonderful flight that brought each bird's personal and species history soaring over the Concordia University campus. Beginning with a lone osprey at noon (I can remember thinking what great luck to have arrived right then, but was it really only luck) there was a steady movement of these twice a year commuters. Broad-wings, kestrels, sharp-shins, soaring red-tails (mostly immatures) and maybe a lone peregrine falcon that snuck by hugging the lakeside. Identifying or not identifying it was the difference in the time that it took to move one's head from a migrating swarm of dragon flies to the lake where moments before we watched and noted the need to be aware of what was happening lakeside as that was where a peregrine might appear.

Yet, even without a single migrating hawk, the day couldn't be considered a loss. For me, there is always the expectation that the next speck on the far northern horizon will be the one raptor, out of step with her brethren's conservative approach to the lure of the south, that flies to the same rhythm that brought the two of us to the shore to wait in the overcast. Anticipation, whether or not rewarded is an important feature of hawk watching.

Another reason why the day was not a loss is that it prompted me to consider why my connection to raptors, especially during migration. Surely, part of the affinity stems from the realization that, less than two hours from my city surroundings, and on the grounds of a University, I can do more than just watch. Like the students who study here I too have come to learn. I learn
because, when at a migration lookout point, I am a coactor in a centuries old drama. And, there is insight, about oneself and things natural, that comes from this participation. Others, college students, their families, and perhaps even their instructors, come by for a minute or two to look at Lake Michigan, perhaps drawn by some unrealized lure of their aquatic homeland. Yet, they are unaware of the drama overhead. As each small, often noisy, group approaches, I have mixed feelings. Should I let them in on my secret, allow them to share in the elegance of the soaring buteos, the flap-flap-sail of the accipiters, or do I let them miss out? Maybe they wouldn't care anyway (I once tried telling my neighbor why I wore binoculars while mowing my lawn in the spring. He didn't get it, even when there was a kettle of 150 broad wings directly over his house). Maybe it is only me that, because of some idiosyncratic peculiarity of birth or upbringing, thinks missing a hawk migration season, or even a single migrant, leaves an unfilled void. More watchers do not, I realize, dilute the experience or alter the spectacle. Nothing seems to have a diluting effect on the experience. I've watched raptor migration amid hundreds of onlookers at Pennsylvania's Hawk Mountain Sanctuary where a few decades earlier the carcasses of the migrating birds, shot by “sportsmen,” littered the ground that we watched from. And it is not the watching that affects the spectacle from the hawks' vantage point. It is the saw, the plow and the gun, wielded in the international political arena that could affect them. But maybe I need to be more active in promoting the September through November run of this performance. The youth who study so assiduously in lab and library fifty meters away also need, especially when the classroom is so close, to study nature. Learning biology should, I believe, be connected to the spirit as well as the head, and that is not easily accomplished among formalin-soaked laboratory specimens.

Even after leaving I still wondered why the connection to raptors? My first experience, at least that I can recall, with a raptor occurred when I was a teen. It was in the large weedlot/hayfield behind John McGuire's house, one of the many fields that, as the summer wore on was converted into a ballfield by a group of salt-miners' sons and daughters. This was before the days when sports were over-organized by adults. We mowed, trampled, built pitcher's mounds and makeshift backstops, and then played baseball for hours. We didn't want adults intruding into our world, and they being smart enough to realize this, or too busy to meddle, left us to ourselves until baseballs began to land perilously close to picture windows and passing cars. An interesting feature of McGuire Field was that the belt-high grass and weeds came right up to the first and third base lines. I don't remember whether or not this cut down on foul balls and straightened out our swings. I suspect not since searching for lost balls lengthened many an inning. On a July day, after having chosen sides and decided who had first ups by throwing a bat to another kid and then marching fists to the top to see whose thumb was the first over the rounded knob of the bat handle, a red-tailed hawk, wings pressed back along its body, plummeted into the field along the first base line. I had never seen anything like this. Rather than marvel at the playing out of a food chain exchange that I might have vaguely remember from school, I hurled the bat. Like a helicopter rotor it sailed, twirling in the general direction of the red-tail. As it left my hands I realized that my aim, even though the hawk was hidden by the tall grass and weeds, might have been better than I had intended. I still can remember shaking as I waited for the bat to roost, for it was not my intent to be a killer. I really can't be sure, but a life's worth of wisdom may have come to me as the few seconds of the bat's flight passed. It landed, right where the hawk had, moments before, hoped to lunch on a meadow mouse or inattentive rabbit. As the bat disappeared from sight, the red-tail emerged, as if from a grassy chrysalis, and with a few strong wing beats (but empty talons) left me to baseball, and maybe a lifelong interest in raptors.

Following the bat incident my enthusiasm for raptors lay dormant for years. It was rekindled by trips to Derby Hill, near Mexico New York (home of Grandma Brown's baked beans and a bar with giant plastic palm trees out front) and Hawk Mountain Pennsylvania. The point is not to trace the ontogeny of my interest in hawks, but to share the realization that my connection to hawks, one brought about by that the hawkless week in early September, is because of what they have taught me about science education. There is a need in science education for passion, of both the intellect and the spirit.