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The Day My Daughter Learned That Hawks Want To Devour Other Birds — Not Berries

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Have you ever seen what a pigeon looks like after a hawk has caught it?

There's not much left. And what does remain looks like an Iron Maiden album cover. My daughters and I came across a pigeon corpse one day on the sidewalk, which had been dropped at the bottom of a large tree, like the leftovers from hastily eaten takeout.

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The body was stripped of feathers, skin, muscle and fat, leaving a gleaming white cavity of ribs and leg bones. Its wings still had feathers and the head was mottled with patches of tenacious skin. Its eyes had been expertly removed.

I tried to shield the bird's body from my daughters who were steps behind me. But they knew something was up. "Why are you standing so weird?" asked my middle daughter, Elizabeth.

My eldest, Sonia, was already inspecting the wreckage behind me. She was fascinated. "Whoa. You think the hawk did this?" she asked.

"'It's not nice to kill,' said Elizabeth"

"The hawk" was a recent addition to our neighbourhood. I had been hearing screeches for weeks along our dense urban block, but I thought they were just recordings played by shopkeepers to scare pigeons away.

Then, one day I saw it soaring in the sky, far larger than a pigeon or a seagull, and far more composed. It was gliding around in lazy loops looking for prey.

A few days after this first sighting, a neighbour pointed it out to me and the kids, sitting on the top branch of a large deciduous tree with a perfect view over the neighbourhood. In the early morning you could see it, often alongside a companion hawk, sitting at the top of the tree facing east with their breasts glowing white with the morning sun. Apparently there are many of them in the neighbourhood, a community of Cooper's Hawk.

I'm not an expert in ornithology or post-mortem avian analysis, but I was pretty sure the hawk had caused our present carnage. "It looks like it," I said. "Just don't touch." Sonia came up with a hypothesis on why the wings and head were pretty much untouched ("I guess there's nothing to eat there") and where the hawk was resting in the tree when he ate. My youngest daughter didn't know what she was looking at and got bored — she's three. Elizabeth started to cry.

I made a hasty analogy.

"You know how I walk up to No Frills every weekend and get food?" I said.

"Yes," sniffed Elizabeth.

"Well, the hawk does too. That's where all the pigeons hang out."

There were always lots of pigeons at the No Frills. The girls liked to run at them while they were pecking for food and they'd laugh when they all took off at the same time.

We'd watch them fly in large circles around the parking lot, moving like a swarm of fish, sometimes alighting on buildings, sometimes on wires.

Staying in a pack apparently makes them safer when the hawk is around, but one of them often got picked off when they made their rounds.

“They have to eat too,” I said to Elizabeth.

She just shook her head.

“Even if I was a carnivore I would try and eat berries,” said Elizabeth.

We saw the hawks often that year, often early in the morning as we walked up to the bus stop. Once the hawk landed in our backyard, a few metres from our kitchen window. Its chest was off-white and flecked with shards of light brown. Its wings, a darker brown, tucked neatly by its side. It only stayed a few seconds so I didn’t have time to get the kids or even snap a photo but I told the kids when they got home from school.

“They have to eat too,” I said to Elizabeth.”

On a neighbourhood Facebook site, people have, unsurprisingly, strong opinions about the hawks. “I’ve tweeted 311,” posted one woman after seeing them for the first time. “Why?” asked another user. “To re-home them,” she said, thinking she was doing the hawks a favour. They are not safe where they are.”

This poor woman was then on the receiving end of what we have come to expect from people on social media who feel like they have spotted an injustice. “They are part of the ecosystem!” wrote one user in disbelief. The hawks were not “re-homed.”

“They’ll kill animals in the forest, too,” said Sonia.

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“It’s not nice to kill,” said Elizabeth, still convinced that if they just tried the berries they might like them enough to stop the carnage.

Sonia tried to explain that “nice” had nothing to do with it, but Elizabeth wasn’t convinced.

We didn’t have this debate for very long. Just a few weeks ago, some crows banded together to launch a sustained campaign of harassment designed to drive the hawks out of the neighbourhood. It worked. We no longer saw the hawks on their morning tree, nor did we hear them screech overhead on trips to the grocery store.

Last week, though, while jogging a few blocks from our street, a Cooper’s Hawk startled me by flying over a hedge of cedar trees just a few metres above my head. I watched as it circled around a large pine tree a few blocks away where it was presumably doling out lessons about life and death to a new family, one dead pigeon at a time.

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