

The Messengers

by GG

The scalloped edges of rich green oak trees lined the rolling hills of Basket Slough Wildlife Refuge. Behind the oaks, billowing white clouds mimicked the curved arboreal flow of the trees. Stretched out in front of the oaks was a gold and brown field of dried Queen Anne's Lace. I stopped on the path, took a deep breath, and let my eyes receive the landscape: honey gold, nutmeg brown, olive green, and dove white, all opening under a mantle of blue.

It was a joy I'd taken for granted – clear views and breathing clean, fresh air. Wildfires had raged in Oregon over the past week and burned many of my favorite mountain hiking trails in the Santiam wilderness, and the loss was heartbreaking. Each day brought tragic news of burned out forests and lost homes.

The fires caused ten days of soup-like smoky air classified as “hazardous.” My house in downtown Salem, Oregon, had been surrounded in smoke and I'd been trapped inside for days. That Saturday, after a welcome westerly wind had brought rain, the online air quality meter showed green. My friend, Joan, and I couldn't get out on the trail fast enough.

Joan is a sturdy, steadfast woman, and a great hiking partner because of her keen powers of observation. I, myself, am exceptionally good at spotting wildlife and botanical wonders, but when I hike with Joan, I know I'll see things I might not notice on my own. Still, I was surprised by what we saw and what happened that day.

Cloud cover kept the air cool and the perfect temperature for late summer hiking. We walked an even, steady pace along a well-worn path that flanked the hill, wove up through an oak savanna, and down onto flat land where shallow lakes featured a variety of water birds.

When we reached Morgan Lake, we sat on a bench and watched digger ducks dive down and pop their little feathered behinds up like corks bobbing around on the water. A great blue heron stood motionless in the mud flats, and the Canada geese gathered at the far end of the lake honking alerts to one another. I crunched on my apple. Joan and I chatted about hiking gear, politics, and birds.

When I first spied the bird of prey wafting over the field, I thought it was a red-tailed hawk. But something about the shape and color was off. The tail was too narrow, and there was an unmistakable splash of white on the rump. Joan saw it too. Then a second hawk launched from a nearby blackberry bramble and joined the first. We watched the two swooping across the fields and wetlands, dipping down close to the ground, then soaring back up again. Searching. Hunting.

“They’re hawks,” I said. “But they’re not red tails. What do you think they are?”

We had enough cell reception to google “brown hawk white patch on rump.” The answer popped up: Northern Harrier. I had hiked at Baskett Slough a dozen or more times and had never seen a Northern Harrier. Neither of us had ever seen one before, anywhere. We were thrilled. They are slender, medium-sized raptors with long, broad wings and a long, rounded tail. At one point, they flew close enough for us to see their flat, owl-like faces and small, sharply hooked bills.

The hawks held our attention until they glided over the oak-lined hill and out of sight. We finished our snacks and hiked back up over the rise and through the woods where saucer-sized, yellow maple leaves covered the path underfoot.

“We were so lucky to be out here when the Northern Harriers were flying over,” I said.

“I’m surprised you’ve never seen one before, considering how much time you’ve spent hiking and being out the wilderness.” Joan said.

After we drove the 25 miles back into town, we treated ourselves to a chocolate mousse dessert at my house. When Joan got ready to leave, I followed her out the door and down the front walkway.

It was while we stood there, saying our goodbyes, that we heard a *keek-keek-keek* calling out from somewhere behind the house near the suet bird feeders.

“What’s that bird call?” Joan asked.

“Oh, I think that’s one of the Downy Woodpeckers at the feeder,” I said. “They make that squeak-toy noise.”

“I know the woodpecker cry,” Joan said. “But that call had a deeper tone to it.”

We walked around the side of the house searching for the source of the sound. Nothing. No birds.

Then, a movement overhead caught my eye and I looked up to see something that I thought at first was an illusion. Out from the trees, directly over my head, flew a beautiful doe-brown Northern Harrier with that blaze of white gleaming at the base of its tail.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Is that a Northern Harrier?” *Keek-keek-keek*, we heard again.

“There’s another one,” Joan said. I turned my head to catch another hawk flying over and joining the first one. They both flew into a nearby cedar and disappeared among the dark limbs.

It’s important that I clarify right here that I live in the middle of the city of Salem, a good distance east of Baskett Slough. I couldn’t logically wrap my head around the fact that, not only had I seen Northern Harriers for the first time while hiking that day, but I was seeing them again, flying over my inner-city bungalow.

Joan and I stood in the street and kept our eyes riveted on the tree where the hawks had landed. Again, *Keek-keek-keek*. We conjectured why they might be there, in the city, over my house. But nothing about it really made sense. I thought that maybe they were gathering in the area to migrate. Joan agreed that could be a possibility but questioned whether hawks actually do migrate.

We ended the evening in joyful conversation and amazement about our good fortune, and the miracle of seeing the hawks twice in one day. How fun (albeit a bit frivolous) to imagine that they might have followed us.

I reflected on how it had happened that we had stopped out front and seen those hawks while saying goodbye.

“If you hadn’t questioned that bird call, we would have missed the Harriers because you would have left, and I would have gone back into the house,” I said.

After Joan left, I went to the bookshelf and pulled out a book, *Animal-Speak, The Spiritual & Magical Powers of Creatures Great and Small*, by Ted Andrews. There were five pages devoted to an explanation of hawk medicine, summarized this way: *The hawk is the messenger bird, and wherever it shows up, pay attention. There is a message coming.*

What an honor. What a joy. What a gift.

The next morning, I woke up to another day of welcome clean, fresh air. I opened my front door first thing. It was 6:00 am. The streets were empty, and all was quiet in the neighborhood. I sat down in my usual morning nesting place where I drink coffee and contemplate my day.

Wait. What was I hearing? *Keek-keek-keek – keek-keek*. I launched out of my chair barefoot and made my way into the street as the call resounded again from a tall cedar across the road. *Keek-keek-keek*. I craned my neck and scanned the tree, was it really her? Then, everything got quiet.

My neighbor peered out the window, probably curious about why I was standing in the middle of the street, barefooted in my pajamas and robe. I waved briefly then looked back up at the cedar. In that moment she glided out of the limbs and over my head liked a winged messenger from the spirit world.

I felt like my spirit was soaring along with the hawk. Her presence was a balm for my wild-fired broken heart. She was a reminder that miracles are out there just waiting for us to find them.

The visit from the Northern Harriers reawakened my hope. I vowed that I would go and visit the ravaged, burned out places in the Santiam wilderness, just as I would for a dear friend who was recovering from a devastating illness. I would continue to show my love for the earth regardless of how harsh things might look now. Maybe I would find a different type of beauty there. Who knows? Maybe there are miracles there just waiting for me to find them.