

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE _____

A Case of Swanslaughter

Part of Clark Pond on Great Neck in Ipswich can be seen from our home on a hill one hundred feet above sea level and set back about five hundred feet from the pond. In the early afternoon of April 7, 1995, we were watching the swans that live there. A pair of Mute Swans has nested on the pond for about twelve consecutive years, always chasing away any other swans intruding into the area, including a Whooper Swan that continually tried to muscle in on the territory in 1994.

On this day, however, we noted three swans swimming and feeding peacefully. Through our binoculars, one appeared to be a Whooper Swan, sometimes swimming with the Mute Swans, sometimes flying to a smaller part of the pond set off by grasses. We drove to Clark Road where we could observe the birds more closely. From there we could also see a third Mute Swan swimming on Plum Island Sound, just off the narrow beach that separates the sound from the pond.

The Whooper flew into the smaller part of the pond for a short time, then returned to the north end of the pond where the Mute pair was feeding. After just a minute or two, the Whooper again took flight, this time flying directly at the Mute swimming on the sound, and aggressively attacked it. They struggled, wings flapping, the Whooper standing on top of the Mute, holding it under the water. Viewed through a telescope, it seemed to be grasping the neck of the Mute in its beak.

The tide was beginning to come in, and as the struggle was stopping, the pair drifted out of our sight, with the Whooper still on top of the dying Mute Swan.

We drove to Bowdoin Road, nearer to the sound, but we could see no sign of the swans there. We then drove a short distance to the Ipswich Bay Yacht Club and down the boat ramp, where we saw them. The Whooper was standing on the Mute, which was lying dead on its side, grounded at the edge of the water. It pulled at the Mute's feathers with its beak. Twice it spread its wings, raised its beak straight up as high as it could, and squawked in different pitches. A flock of Herring Gulls was circling the area, squawking loudly at this time.

We got out of the car with a camera, but a walker was approaching the swans, and the Whooper took off in low flight back to the pond. It stayed near the grasses on the sound side of the pond and did not rejoin the pair of Mutes still feeding on the Clark Road side of the pond.

From the time the attack began until the Whooper returned to the pond, we estimate that about twenty to twenty-five minutes passed.

Everyone on Great Neck is familiar with the swans, watching the cygnets

with interest as they grow up on the pond each summer. In fact, the Mute Swan has become the emblem of Great Neck. This spring opened with a strange chapter in the story of the Clark Pond swans. This incident has raised a lot of questions in our minds about the nature of these beautiful birds.

Gina and Web Jackson, Ipswich, Massachusetts

Death — and Life — on the Mystic

On Sunday, February 12, 1995, my wife Julie and I were birding at the nearby Mystic Lakes, looking for the American Coot, Hooded Mergansers, Common Mergansers, and Ring-necked Ducks that had been using the open areas of the lower lake and the river. The lower lake was now over ninety-five percent frozen, with only a narrow seam of open water below the upper dam and along the adjacent edges. Ten Mallards and nine coots were working those edges.

In the shallow, crystal clear water I was able to clearly watch the coots' unusual feet as they propelled the birds along. Coot's toes are highly segmented, with long, horizontal flaps of soft skin that fold up as they lift their feet and unfold when they put their feet down. The flaps help them to walk easily in muddy areas and enable them to swim relatively well without truly webbed feet.

I began taking pictures. After a few minutes three coots emerged from the water and started feeding within about six feet of me, in perfect February afternoon light. They browsed in the leaf litter, something I had never seen before, plopping down like young goslings and pecking around them. I finished a roll of film but did not reload because I had left my camera pack in the car and, besides, I had enough good shots of coot now. (Every amateur photographer can imagine what happened next.)

Suddenly, there was an audible panic among the three coots, which began running toward the water. Two made it, but the third, which apparently had been feeding farthest inland, did not. Suddenly a spectacularly beautiful adult Red-tailed Hawk was standing on the coot's back, with one foot on its neck holding its head down to the ground.

The captive bird was alive, seemingly uninjured, no more than six feet away from me. I was in shock, having been totally unaware of the Redtail until then. The hawk was now clearly aware of my presence, but did not know what to make of me. Perhaps the hawk really had not been aware of me either, until then.

The Red-tailed Hawk stood on the coot, looking directly at me, the late afternoon February sun reflecting off its rufous-washed breast. I thought that if I suddenly moved toward the hawk, it might release the coot. Over the past two years, I have grown extremely fond of coot and have followed individual coot all winter long in the Mystic River and lakes. I had just spent an hour photographing and watching these awkward, unusual, and very personable birds.

Thoughts then turned to this magnificent Red-tailed Hawk. I had been this close to a healthy, live, wild Redtail only once in my life, when an immature Redtail I was watching flew directly at me, ploughed into a pile of leaves several feet from me, and pulled a rodent out of the leaf litter.

Should I move? Should I intervene? I did not want the coot to die, but I was also concerned about the hawk. It had been very cold for two days. This was an adult urban Red-tailed Hawk that had struck only an hour or so before sunset. It could be starving, and it had earned this kill. I decided to not interfere.

I realized that I might have seen the hawk before. A year earlier, when I had been snowshoeing the southern shore of the Mystic Lakes, I saw a gray ghost shoot low through these very woods. Goshawk came instantly to mind because the bird looked quite pale and was rifling through the lower trees along the shore. It turned out to have been pursuing a squirrel, which it did not catch, but as it came up, I realized it was a relatively pale, light-backed Red-tailed Hawk.

The hawk still did not know what to make of me. Neither of us moved, staring at each other for over five minutes. Then the hawk slowly took wing, carrying the live coot by the neck and shoulders in one foot. The Redtail visibly struggled to get off the ground, moving only a few yards. It slowly heaved onto a tree branch no more than ten feet away from and slightly above me. The raptor and its prey were in an awkward position, directly facing the brunt of a strong, freezing wind. The coot dangled beneath the branch, feet flailing to gain support, and wings occasionally spread to fly away, but in vain.

The hawk took several pecks at the front of the coot's neck, but did not seem to deliver a coup de grace. The hawk then jumped/flew a few feet farther downwind on the branch, to get better support and possibly escape the bone-chilling wind. By this time, the coot had gone entirely limp and was clearly dead.

I slowly backed away from the hawk and worked my way to the car where Julie had been observing everything. Suddenly, the Redtail jumped off the branch with its prey and, barely able to keep aloft, struggled vigorously to fly off with the coot. Exposed to the buffeting winds, it had to work very hard to clear ten feet, but it gradually disappeared into the denser woods, presumably looking for shelter and privacy.

Julie asked "After that, do you still love hawks?" She was only half joking. I was in shock and awe. I have seen a fair number of hawk kills over my lifetime but mostly of small rodents, insects, or fish. Never had I seen something so close to me, something I had been watching and photographing for an hour, slain only a few feet in front of me. I was saddened by the death of the coot, but impressed by the skills and strength displayed by the hawk.


I also marveled at serendipity. I have been looking avidly at hawks for more than two decades, and never had I seen anything like this, so close, so intense, and so personal. As we were leaving, an elderly gentleman who had arrived as

the hawk was flying off said he had seen the hawk in the area many times before, occasionally going unsuccessfully after house cats prowling the lakeshore.


On the way home, Julie and I discussed how heavy the coot must have been, as the Red-tailed Hawk had obviously had difficulty lifting it. We thought that it was probably heavier than a Mourning Dove, more likely the weight of a pigeon, two species that Red-tailed Hawks, especially urban ones, often prey on. We were soon educated. John Terres, in his superb *Encyclopedia of Birds*, reports that Mourning Doves range from 4.4 to 5.5 ounces and common pigeons from 10 to 16 ounces. American Coot, however, weigh from 13.5 to 29 ounces. Now we understood why the Red-tailed Hawk had struggled. According to William S. Clark in *A Field Guide to Hawks*, Redtails range from 24 to 52.8 ounces. This Red-tailed Hawk had looked small to me; probably a male. Therefore, it was possible that the hawk had lifted something as heavy as one-half its own body weight or more.

We monitored the remaining eight coots through the winter and were a bit surprised to see all eight survive. Perhaps the Red-tailed Hawk did not like the taste of coot or just had an aversion to heavy lifting. Whatever, we shall never forget that day on the Mystic.

Paul M. Roberts, Medford, Massachusetts

An illustration of a coot, a waterfowl with a dark head and neck and a body covered in a grid-like pattern, sitting on a nest. To the left of the coot are several tall reeds with long, thin leaves and seed heads.

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