

THE CASE OF THE PURLOINED HAWK EGGS

By David A. Talman

Even granting that there is a little larceny (or lunacy) in all of us, who would have stolen two Red-tailed Hawk eggs from a ledge outside a suite of offices of a downtown Worcester law firm? And why?

These two eggs were the third clutch laid by Red-tailed Hawks on the ledge outside my window. The first set of three eggs followed the building of the hawks' first nest there in the winter of 1997. Risking censure by any purists among the readers of this article, I confess I lured the hawks to nest there by placing piles of small sticks on the ledge, thereby making it more convenient for the hawks to build there; it was a bit like the local lumber yard delivering the wood for one's new home. Two of those three eggs successfully turned into adult birds, although the rehabilitation services of the Worcester Science Center were required when the young birds were discovered scurrying and fluttering about in downtown Worcester traffic.

The occasion of this first nesting was greeted with some interest by the local press, and one of the articles about the hawks included some good-natured bantering between a member of my law firm and a member of another law firm in downtown Worcester, where hawks had nested the year before. The latter facetiously threatened suit for alienation of affection, while our firm treated the relocation as the selection of a better law firm by a pair of "clients." I offered to negotiate a settlement with the other firm, and volunteered to bind the settlement agreement with a deposit delivered personally by me. At the time, there were many deposits on my ledge: not only feces, but the corpses of a rat, a mouse, and several pigeons and sparrows.

In 1998, again responding to my now-sophisticated nest-building efforts, the hawks returned to fledge two more young. Again, the young birds had to be rescued and rehabilitated at the Worcester Science Center. The release by the Center was televised locally, and bird lovers from far and wide witnessed the event.

By the spring of 1999 I began to think of myself as some kind of amateur hawk breeder. My nest was so good that the hawks barely worked on it themselves; they moved into it like a young couple into a furnished apartment. The female sat on her eggs through the last two weeks of March and first week of April. And then, in the second week of April, the eggs disappeared — no shells, no nothing. The hawks stayed at the nest for a few days and then abandoned it.

According to Wayne Petersen, a field ornithologist with the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the principal causes of Red-tailed Hawk egg predation are raccoons (which cannot climb nine stories of vertical concrete), crows (which

would break the eggs, leaving shells behind), and humans. The possible motivations of humans, he told me, would be to raise the birds in captivity (illegally), to use the eggs in an egg collection, or simply to destroy the eggs to carry out some grievance against the birds. The birds had been universally popular in my firm, and indeed generally popular in the office building in which I work.

The only reasonable conclusion about the disappearance is that the eggs were stolen. It is very unlikely that I will ever find out their fate. I will miss the insistent shrieks of the parents as they coordinated the feeding of their hatchlings, calls that had enlivened my office during the last two springs. Even more, I will miss the chance to watch in awe and fascination as the fledglings exercise their wing muscles to prepare for the day when they will launch themselves, perhaps too confidently, from my ledge to their uncertain future in the sky above.

David A. Talman has worked in Worcester since 1957 as a lawyer specializing in civil litigation. He developed a fondness for birds while pursuing his enthusiasm for wilderness paddling: he kayaks frequently both in Massachusetts waters and in such exotic locations as the South Pacific and Tierra del Fuego. He has published several articles on his kayaking experiences in *Appalachia*, the journal of the Appalachian Mountain Club.

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