

YOUNG BIRDERS

Close Encounters of an Avian Kind

Andrew P. Brissette

I have been birding off and on since the age of ten. Over the years my grandmother, Kathleen Anderson, has edged me toward changing birding from a hobby to a passion, and just recently she completed the task. What really has gotten me interested in birding is the raptors. I don't know if it is just their size, or their amazing eyes, or their hunting instinct. It just astonishes me. My fascination with raptors began when I was five; since then there are four raptors in particular that I have come to know.

In 1992 I took a trip to Montana with my grandmother and grandfather. We were driving, and we saw an eagle flying by. It perched on a nearby ledge. We put the window scope on it, and I swear that Golden Eagle looked right into the scope directly into my eyes, or so I thought at the time.

Then came the Bald Eagle I got to know when my grandmother took me to see the release of an injured eagle that had been returned to good health. Next, during 1998 and 1999, a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks nested in my backyard. I observed these birds day in and day out from my bedroom window.


And last was the Northern Goshawk. For several years my grandmother has had a pair of goshawks nesting in her woods. Just this May she took me out there to see them. After that I went back into the woods to see them on numerous occasions. I learned their loud *kek, kek, kek* call. People had told me they were big, but you can't really appreciate that until you have an experience with them as I did.

One day my grandmother told me that Bob Clem, whom I had met at the Daniel Webster Audubon Sanctuary, was coming to videotape the Goshawks. After he had put up the blind, he stayed there from 12:00 p.m. to 2 p.m. documenting the Goshawks' activities. Then he brought the tape back to my grandmother's house for us to see. As I watched the tape, I saw the Goshawks bring prey to their young, and the young bobbing up and down. I had never had such looks at goshawks before.

That same day, after Bob left, I asked, "Nana, can I go out to the blind?" But she said, "Oh no, you mustn't disturb them again today. Maybe in a few days." Well, those few days passed, and I asked again. She nodded and said, "Go ahead." I had to be back at my house at 5 p.m. for dinner. I ran out to the blind full of excitement. As I made my way through the woods, I realized the goshawks hadn't made any noise. What I didn't know was that they were off hunting. I got into the blind, and I watched. For about ten minutes they didn't show up. I was just taking my last look when in they came. I watched as they brought food for the young. I observed for about an hour and saw it was ten minutes before five o'clock, so I packed up to start home. The goshawks weren't too happy about that.

As soon as I opened the blind, I heard *kek! kek! kek!*, and down they came, both taking turns swooping at me. I started to run with a stick over my head. After about twenty yards one of the goshawks took the stick right out of my hands. I plastered myself against a tree where they couldn't see me. There was a moment of silence. I looked to the left, and there in the tree behind me about ten yards away was the female perched. I then looked to the right, and there in the tree behind me about the same distance away was the male. There was a mosquito biting my leg, and I moved to swat it. Down came the goshawks swooping in front of me, coming so close to hitting me with those tremendous talons. I went to grab another stick, and down they came again, once more being within inches of me. I was trapped.

I waited for about half an hour, trying not to move but sometimes having to, causing them to dive again. Every once in a while I would slowly poke my head out from behind the tree and watch these birds. They were truly spectacular. Then I looked at my watch, and it was 5:20. I knew I was in trouble. At last I heard my grandmother calling "Andrew. Andrew, Andrew. It's after five." I said, "Nana, I'm out here. The goshawks won't let me leave." She said, "Pick up a stick." I replied, "They took my stick." Then she came through the trees to get me. We made our way back, and all the birds did was scream. I guess one boy looked easier to pick off than two people, one an adult.

That surely was the best and most awesome look at a bird in the wild that I have ever experienced. It was really a special thing for me, but at the same time I couldn't have been more scared. 



This photograph of Andrew and his grandmother was taken at the Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown, Rhode Island, on a South Shore Bird Club trip.

Andrew P. Brissette, thirteen, is in the eighth grade at the John T. Nichols Middle School in Middleborough. He plays defense for the Bay State Clippers in the Massachusetts Premier Soccer League and is a member of the South Shore Bird Club. Between school and soccer practice, he finds time for birding in the woods around his home and with the South Shore Bird Club.

Editor's note: The February issue of Bird Observer will feature an article by Andrew's grandmother, Kathleen Anderson, on the past fifty years of observing birds and other wildlife in her very special backyard at Wolf Trap Hill.