

September 2009: Meditations on Geese

Right now I hear geese flying downriver in the dark. This never fails to bring to mind lines of poetry by Robert Penn Warren, describing a similar experience: "I could not see them, there being no moon/ And the stars sparse. I heard them./ I did not know what was happening in my heart."

In his poem the geese are flying northward in spring, but the emotional poignancy he expresses echoes my mood. When we hear geese return each spring, we're filled with a simple hope and renewed joy. In fall, we know they're leaving us. Something deeper and even more complex happens in the heart, some grief tinged with appreciation for the beauty of life—a sad thrilling to the sound that marks the season's change, as the creatures and leaves begin to fall away and we slowly enter the stark and quiet of winter. All that triggered by a simple sound in the night...

Here in Camden Canada geese are a familiar presence, big families merging into flocks that congregate on our lakes, rivers, fields and often, to our disgust, lawns and golf courses. On the Megunticook River my parents mark their seasons by the goose cycle: the pairs arrive back in early spring, noisily flying upriver to announce their presence; the fluffy golden goslings appear in late spring; the motley teenage goslings in mid-molt start feeding on their lawn with the adults by mid-summer; by late summer the whole gang looks alike, all grazing together in local pastures like livestock. And then one day they're gone.

Geese being among the larger and more common birds, you don't need to be a bird-watcher to recognize one. While the predominant wild goose species we see here is the Canada goose, every once in a while an oddball will show up in the flock. In fall and early winter it is not uncommon to find a snow goose among the geese feeding in the fields of Aldermere Farm, for instance, and we've found a couple mixed in with a late-lingering flock on the Samoset golf course during December's Christmas Bird Count. Snow geese come in two colors: dark morph (the "blue goose") and light morph. The blue goose's body is predominately grey with a white neck and head; the white morph mostly white with black wingtips. Driving through the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in western Vermont, thousands of snow geese rise in a magnificent rush of white wings during migration to and from the St. Lawrence River. But here in mid-coast Maine, it's a lucky thing to see just one.

As a birder I appreciate the beauty of geese. One of the dream birds I'd love to see in my lifetime is the stunning red-breasted goose of the European Arctic tundra. But perhaps I am especially fond of wild geese because I grew up alongside a pet goose, albeit a domestic one, named Max. When I was nine, Diane O'Brien gave my grandmother a clutch of fertile chicken eggs to calm a broody hen. Just for fun, Diane threw in a goose egg. The hen's maternal instincts apparently only extended to incubating the eggs, because as each chick hatched out, she killed it. She tried to attack the gosling, too, but my grandmother rescued him. By so doing, she became his imprinted mother, and he became as close to human as a goose can get.

Because I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, I soon became part of Max's extended family. He would follow me around the yard and I would tell him long stories that I made up just for his benefit. I had to carry a stick, because he liked to nip at my legs, but he was never nastily aggressive as many geese can be. He did like to chase cars pulling into the dooryard, pecking tires and honking belligerently. When cars drove away, he would run after them up the driveway, wildly flapping his wings, ushering them off the premises. Come to think of it, I don't think my grandparents ever clipped his wings; I think Max just never learned to fly. We didn't fly, and so he didn't realize he was missing anything.

My grandparents didn't have any dogs or cats, they had Max. He spent his days roaming the barnyard and the lawn, weeding the garden or bathing in the nearby stream. Nights, to protect him from foxes, he came inside. Although he slept in the well-papered mudroom, most evenings he also liked to come in and watch television with us in the living room. The screen was at head level, and Max would stand right up against it, following the action with his beady brown eyes and honking softly. We got used to watching through his head, with its big, black-knobbed bill. He was especially responsive to shows with a lot of action: football over Lawrence Welk, the high-pitched voices and antics of the Muppets over the nightly news. When the tv was turned off, that was his sign to go back to the mudroom to sleep.

Years passed, I went away to college, my grandmother died, and my grandfather eventually sold the farm and moved to town. He told me he gave Max to a farm with other geese, but I never asked where and we never talked about it again. I didn't want to know, finding it hard to imagine how a goose who had spent his years with a human family would fit in with regular old, bad-mannered, ill-tempered barnyard geese. My grandfather loved Max like we love any house pet, but I think giving Max away was one way to help him deal with the loss of my grandmother and move on.

Some domestic geese can live to be more than forty years old, so Max may very well be happily living out his days somewhere. He would only be thirty-three now. Whenever I see a flock of domestic geese, I look for one like him, sure I would recognize him if I saw him. And maybe this is why I so enjoy watching flocks of wild geese, as well, recognizing the familiar features and behaviors of my old buddy Max in these other geese, feeling a real sort of kinship with them. So when the geese call out overhead on their way south, my heart is truly stirred in more ways than one, as I say goodbye to summer and all our summer birds and also remember the years past with Max on my grandparents' farm.