

March 2008: Meditations on Wolves and Ravens

I am one of those Mainers who firmly believes that the harshness of the New England winter is exaggerated, even though I'm also cold all the time. Winter here offers its own set of outdoor pleasures that makes it worth sticking around for.

However, this winter has been a particularly snowy one, and I have to confess that the long month of March lurks like a storm cloud on the year's horizon for me right now. Officially, spring starts here in Maine at 1:48 a.m. on March 20, but those of us who live here know that we have equal odds of enjoying a snowstorm or balmy warmth on the long-awaited vernal equinox.

Perhaps that's why I've been thinking dark thoughts lately. Specifically, about that big black bird, the raven. It all started when friends recently took my husband and I to the Loki Clan Wolf Refuge on the New Hampshire-Maine border. So as to approach on foot, we parked down the road from the refuge, which rescues wolf hybrids from illegal breeders and "pet" owners ill-equipped to handle this wild species. As we neared the refuge compound, we heard a sound I instantly recognized but had never heard live: the howling of wolves. This primeval sound rose up from the forest around us, and we could see shadowy figures of large animals moving among the trees. It sounds like a cliché, but when a wolf howls that close, in the flesh, a chill really does run up your spine.

And then, as if in answering chorus, the metallic quorks of ravens began to ring out over our heads. We looked up and saw maybe three or four birds circling the one-acre wolf pens. But there were more, many more. We just didn't realize it until we embarked on a guided tour of the refuge and reached a vantage point that offered a scenic vista of the White Mountains. From that point, we could look toward a neighboring hill and see so many ravens in flight that we could barely count them. I estimated about 30 birds, but it was hard to tell--they were swirling and diving among one another, flying in formations of two and four, performing somersaults, snapping at drifting beech leaves, and emitting a crazy cacophony of croaks, quorks, and clinks. A couple of eagles showed up, but squadrons of ravens quickly escorted them from the premises. Ravens were rising up and settling amid the spruce trees in the wolf pen. They soared and circled overhead, black forms against white snow and blank sky.

Often when I am hiking in the Camden Hills, I will hear a strange sound overhead, an animal call that I have never heard in my life. After a moment's confusion, I eventually realize that it's a raven, that old trickster bird trying on a new voice. And I don't think I'm being self-centered when I say that the bird is probably announcing my presence in the woods with that weird call. That's what they do.

At the wolf refuge, the birds were loudest and most numerous when we first arrived, gradually disappearing over the hill or into the trees. The wolves, on the other hand, most of which were accustomed to people, often came right up to us. The refuge has more than 80 wolves on dozens of forested acres straddling two states. These wolves will live out the rest of their lives in the most natural state possible (except that they are sterilized)--free to roam the woods within their large pens, form social packs, and howl their hearts out. These half-wild creatures are the reason for all the ravens.

Ravens and wolves share a long alliance. Ravens long ago recognized that wolves were a source of fresh meat, and often follow hunting packs of wolves. At the wolf refuge, the wolves are fed, if I remember correctly, about 20 pounds of fresh, raw meat a week. Bernd Heinrich's wonderful book "Ravens in Winter" details how ravens, normally solitary or paired birds during the breeding season, will often summon great flocks of fellow ravens to a food source of food in the winter. These ravens were clearly exhibiting that behavior, which made me wonder if some of the wolves had recently been fed.

Several Native American tribes, including the Koyukon of Alaska (as described in Richard Nelson's "Make Prayers to the Raven"), respect the raven as a good omen when hunting. The birds sometimes lead hunters to prey or, more often, arrive on the scene soon after hearing gunshots. The ravens clearly use their superior avian intelligence to take best advantage of any situation. Nelson labels the raven "the greatest character in the boreal forest," and describes how wolves at their prey (and even his own sled dogs) ignore them, enabling the birds to nab quantities of food unmolested.

Ravens used to hover over ancient battlefields of men, as well, seeing a similar advantage to that of hanging out with wolves. Perhaps that's another reason they've been in my thoughts lately--that ever-present fact that we are a country at war, despite the fact that we can't see the battlefield and its carnage first-hand.

Locally, numbers of ravens and eagles can be seen at their opportunistic best right now in Warren, soaring above the St. George River valley and in the vicinity of a poultry farm along Route One. Both species take advantage of ice fishermen on nearby ponds as well as the discarded by-products of poultry processing. By early March, they are also joined by one of our first returning birds of spring: the turkey vulture--gloomy as a harbinger of spring but a beautiful bird in flight. On a bright winter day, even on a bright winter day when the calendar says it's supposed to be spring, my dark thoughts are often dispelled by the sight of dozens of eagles, ravens, and vultures circling over the snow-covered fields. I just have to put out of my head the fact that it's death that has brought them there.

(For more information on the Loki Clan Wolf Refuge, please visit: <http://www.lokiclan.com/>).

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