

Turkey Fights, Swallow Flights and Raven Rites

As I look back on this summer and fall I shudder a bit. This has been a year of too many grim bird stories, but we made it through, and some stories have had happy endings. A great blue heron, lame and with an injured wing, drooped beside the pond for a week or so, until a predator found it one night. A mallard duckling that could not fly stayed on the pond all summer. Then one day in September, miraculously healed; it flew off with two other mallards that had touched down on the pond that morning. With that balanced beginning from the wild, I'll move on to our domestic turkeys.

As usual we let these turkeys get too large before we butchered them, which meant that sex had reared its ugly head. One of the males, absolutely gargantuan in size, got separated accidentally from the other male for a mere hour and a half while we went for a horse ride. When we came home, the two were strutting and preening on opposite sides of the



metal corral gate. I opened the gate, and the big male attacked the smaller, beating at the vulnerable head with his beak. The two had never fought before. Did they suddenly fail to recognize each other? I took one of the males to a pen for "time out" but left the door open--This is my usual procedure when dealing with turkey fights--but this time it did not work. As soon as my back was turned, the big male went after his rival again and killed him. A few days later, the villain took to, to put it delicately, "picking on" the female turkey until she was a total wreck, all shaky and unable to walk. At this point, Big Nasty was imprisoned until the weekend, when he was butchered. Interestingly, when I was cleaning this bird, I discovered that he had two testicles, twice the normal number for a bird. Was this the reason why he was so aggressive?

Even more interesting was the behavior of 'our' wild turkeys during this harrowing week. We had had daily, prolonged, visits from a family of eleven turkeys since August and these wild birds completely ignored the domestic turkeys. The wild flock had a regular routine, first checking out the sheep pans to clean up any leftover grain, then moving into the yard to glean beneath the bird feeder. Undaunted by my presence, they would saunter across the lawn and over to the apple trees. Here the poults were quite amusing. They loved to take dust baths and got so thoroughly dusty that when they flew off, it looked like eight little clouds were ascending from the earth. Sometimes the poults got confused, forgot they could fly, and cried on our side of the fence while their parents went into the pastures to forage for bugs and seeds. These birds were spending more and more time with us. Then, the afternoon of the terrible fight,

they disappeared and did not return to resume their usual foraging routines until the day after we butchered the turkeys. Coincidence? I think not.

More on the wild side, we had three pairs of barn swallows that each raised two batches of babies under the barn eaves. This is a very good average but not unusual. What was unusual was the saga of one pair, the first to nest, taking the best site, located in our barn alley where there were two nests, side by side. The second nest was never occupied, though young swallows would sit in it when they were moving about and getting ready to try flying. One evening very early in June, we came home to find four nearly featherless baby swallows out of the nest. Three were dead and one was dying. Chuck tried to put the still living one back in the nest, and in the process knocked the nest lose. The little bird died in his hand, so he removed the damaged nest. Within a day the parent swallows were renovating the other, never used nest, and soon there was another clutch of eggs which hatched, grew and fledged normally. By this time summer was well advanced, and we assumed that those birds would not try for another brood. Not so. Momma swallow laid a third batch of eggs and three young fledged on the sixteenth of September! The very next day, while the three were sitting on the electric wire, the family was buzzed, almost dive bombed, by a kingfisher, the only time I have seen one of these birds all year. Well, that fright got the little ones up and flying all around, foraging for insects over the pond. On the twenty second of September the swallow family left us. That is the latest we have ever had swallows of any kind in Fox Hollow!

It is late November and our little valley farm is in shade all day for the next two months, but the sun is blazing on the cliff across the road. A red tailed hawk soars above the trees, his tail afire. Hawks are relatively new winter residents here and I welcome their help with problem rodents. I love to hear the redtails' plaintive calls and to watch them circling gracefully above me. Towhees, various chickadees, fox sparrows and juncos abound in all the sheltered places. We have a whole flock of ruby crowned kinglets. But the birds that make me the happiest are the ravens, somber-hued, raucous-voiced, often clumsy. They follow us on our horse rides. Sometimes we will attract as many as five ravens. Why they like to follow horses I do not know. They call and answer our replies. My new horse is a "city gal" and sometimes thinks she is being pursued by demons when the birds fly low over her rump. Raven Trickster, Raven Creator, I should tell her the wonderful raven stories told by the First Peoples. But all I can do is reassure her with my hands and voice, feeling very close to the Earth and well with the earth, as the ravens fly slowly with us through the forest. Reida Kimmel

