

Sundays in the Sky

From the meadow in which I am now lying, I can see a mere slice of sky between the surrounding trees. It is clear, warm, also September, and a northwest wind is ringing down high, fair-weather clouds that sail along the ridge like tall ships and cross above me. A late night has sapped me of all ambition, so instead of working in the garden, as I had intended, I lie on my back in the grass to rest a while, perhaps to sleep. But there is too much happening.

A few yards above me green darner dragonflies dart by, the meadow crickets are singing madly in the surrounding fields, and the little red dragonflies in the genus *Sympetrum* land here and there beside me, zoom off on a mission, and then return to land. I alternately doze and wake and watch the sky.

I am staring into an ill-defined, infinite atmosphere, a space of nothingness where the air is bell clear. But, in the space of a few minutes, things float, wing, drift, or fly by: a broad-winged hawk, a tuft of milkweed, crows, something dark and fast (probably a dragonfly), a slow-flying wasp, its legs dangling more fluff, and ever and always the great parade of clouds.

Hamlet saw camels in the clouds, then weasels, then a whale. English painter John Constable saw brooding skylines, Fragonard saw porcelain, Turner saw fire and conflagration. N.C. Wyeth saw a great sky giant passing in the thunderheads beyond the shores of the Atlantic beaches. All I see today is a dog's head, first a spaniel, blunt nosed, with a rounded forehead, then something with a longer nose, then something very like a Doberman.

Just as the Doberman's head breaks up, I see tiny specks against the white cloud. I know better than to let specks drift by on a September day, so I rouse myself, go in the house, and return with binoculars. There, overhead, descending now in a long stretched-out line, are ten or twenty hawks, probably broad-wings, drifting out of a gyre.

Crows call. I watch a flight shift from the white pines on the top of the ridge to the hickories on the southeastern slope. Much excitement among them, much cawing, with bowed heads and beaks. A red balloon, high amidst the blue,

slowly proceeds to the southeast, as if on a mission. A plane drones by, headed west, then another, also headed west. One follows a few minutes later, a type known, I believe, as a Tomahawk. (Why do so many small planes and fast cars have to be named for weapons or predatory birds and mammals?, I wonder.)



I used to have a problem with low-flying, noisy planes passing over this meadow on Sunday mornings. I made inquiries and found that in all likelihood it was the work of weekend pilots, flying out to breakfast at various airports west of Boston. After the Tomahawk passes, I try to make a calculation of the amount of energy that must be wasted in these breakfast flights, but I fall asleep before I can even begin to figure anything.

A hawk screams, a real one. A red-tail, headed in the wrong direction—northeast. Spiderlings on gossamer drift past, their lines glistening in the sun. Flies skip just above me, a bee, more fluff, another plane, and then high up, its wings steady and its long neck stretched southward, an impossible vision, an anhinga!

I snatch up the binoculars and look more carefully and have to conclude that this is an exceptionally long-necked cormorant. I fall back. Ten minutes later a flight of some ten to fifteen cormorants drifts by, high against the steady march of clouds.

I am used to these surprises in the sky. Once, lying in the same meadow on a summer evening, watching the bats course overhead, I saw an immense tropical bat materialize out from the dark walls of trees beyond the clearing. It soared above me in a twisting flight, dove, and rose again, and, by the time I realized it was a nighthawk, it was gone.

After lunch I fall into a deep sleep. By midafternoon the great parade is still passing—the hawks, the dragons, the fluff, the slow procession of shiplike clouds. It strikes me that elsewhere in the world this must be one of those autumnal days when watchers of the skies see massive flights of hawks passing down the ridges, so, refreshed from my nap, I drive to a nearby cleared height and spend an hour watching the western sky. Nothing appears, the winds have dropped, the clouds settle into low-lying banks in the west, like distant dunes. I should have stayed home.

That night after dark I went back to the meadow. The fair-weather clouds had dispersed, and the black sky was moonless and clear. Overhead I could see the last of the Summer Triangle, with the great constellation, the Swan, at one angle. Like all good migratory birds, now that autumn had arrived, she had swung her long neck around to the south.

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