

Just Arrive for Journal Feb 9-1929  
New York City

CITY LIFE FOR A DUCK HAWK

by

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How could one expect to study bird life from a twenty-first story window of a sky-scraper hotel in the center of New York City? Here among the upper reaches and roofs of lofty buildings are the snow-capped concrete peaks that are at times hidden in the clouds. Below at the base of every deep canyon is the continuous night and day roar,- rumble of cars, buses, and trolleys, the never ending tooting of ambulance horns and shrieking of fire engines. How different from nature's wilderness formations of gigantic cliffs and rock towers that gradually crumble with old age and erosion,- almost as far from the haunts of wild birds as Portland is from this great metropolis.

Off to the left is the tall shaft of the Empire Building that was boosted up over a thousand feet not by nature, but by man. Within sight is the renowned Rockefeller Center where the narrow, window-dotted tooth-pick reaches so far into the sky that it seems in everlasting danger of being toppled over by the gales that sweep in from the sea. We gazed out at this greatest mechanized Grand Canyon of the world, and there was a duck hawk or falcon circling between the gigantic concrete towers. High above and speeding to the South was an airplane scarcely bigger than the hawk because of distance and height.

Suddenly a dark shaft like an arrow shot downward with amazing speed and rush, straight down between the high walls and like a thunderbolt struck a thoughtless winging pigeon. It was the merciless duck hawk picking up his supper so swiftly as to almost elude sight. Or perhaps it was just the love of the chase, for the slim, bold-eyed falcon is a real hunter of his feathered fellows. How unthought-of, how weird a scene of a wild duck hawk living in the greatest city in America, a hawk whose natural home is on the cliffs above the river in a wilderness area.

Look away down between the narrowing walls to the street below.

Pigeons waddle along in the gutters picking up their regular meals or weaving in and out among the hurrying feet. They are a daily part of the life and program of this big city. The birds are at home and contented. The people are more contented because they are there,- yes, the blue pigeons that are fed by old and young and furnish friendliness from the Statue of Liberty to St. Marks in Rome. How many thousands, perhaps millions, of pigeons have taken the city over, no one has ever attempted to estimate. They are here and that is enough. And that is why the duck hawk spends the winter in the city.

Years ago one of the leading naturalists in New Jersey discovered the nest of a duck hawk high up on the Palisades of the Hudson River. Descending the steep wall on a rope to the aery, he found the striking records of twenty-three aluminum bands of carrier pigeons buried around the edges of the nest. It had long been a habit of owners of carrier pigeons to take the birds up to Albany and beyond and release them in competitive races back to New York City. This was a surprising record of the number of pigeons caught by the duck hawk along the fly-way of the river gorge. It may have been these flying contests that turned the old duck hawk into a pigeon hawk.

"I'll never let this discovery reach the public," said the naturalist, "because it would mean that all pigeon owners would make a business of exterminating the few remaining duck hawks along the Hudson."

This was thirty years ago. Times have changed now so the duck hawk's hunting grounds are in the midst of New York City where common pigeons are so abundant. It is the easiest place for him to live. It is even safer for along the rivers, lakes, and marshes every sportsman has his finger on the trigger to nail a hawk that might get a duck.

"Let him live in the city," said the duck hunter. "The city is populated with pigeons. But there is no chance for wing-shooting or hunting them among the massed populace and where there are millions of windows to shatter in every direction."

This finest American falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) is truly a master of the air. Normally he lives and nests where cliffs furnish

good aeries. His fare is composed almost entirely of birds, and he kills at will. No bird is safe from him. When he has tiny young in his inaccessible cliff dwelling, he brings in the smaller song birds to them. Both parent hawks are noisy during the breeding season, uttering piercing calls from the sky, tormenting all the other birds in the region. He sallies forth over lake or marsh for ducks and other game birds. He nests from Alaska and west of central Greenland and as far south as California, ranging into the middle states from Kansas to Maryland. Four is the usual clutch of eggs, but there may be from three to five creamy yellow ones blotched with brown.

He is a streamlined figure of darkish gray with black head, soft tawny breast streaked with black, large piercing black eyes, sharp talons. His cousin, the Peale's falcon, is a darker form that nests on the Aleutians and over to the Commander Islands, and winters in Oregon, where he can be seen dashing into a flock of sandpipers or other shore birds.

The duck hawk is not the only wild bird that drops in from a wilderness area to take up headquarters around the roofs of a large eastern city. Just across the street canyon from our hotel are some penthouse homes on the lofty tops. Surrounding these are little green garden fences enclosing rows of dwarf evergreen trees and pots of little plants as if they were rooted in the concrete fields. Soot, smoke, smells float up from below, but no sweet mountain air. The whole picture is a synthetic make-shift for a home and garden, a substitute for a natural hillside. During the spring and autumn migrations, an occasional warbler or sparrow pauses in curiosity, but soon moves on.

Where a vast area like New York City is massed with huge structures, one would think that birds could not live in such a place. This is true in the case of most species, yet a few can adjust their lives to strange conditions.

Out in the open field or on a graveled island, the nighthawk usually lives. His food is insect life that flies about at night time. He picks up his supper on the wing. The female lays her two dark spotted eggs on the

ground without the sign of a nest. Since a huge city attracts flies, mosquitoes, and other insects, the night hawk likes to hover over it. Far above the masses of people and noisy traffic in the street are graveled roofs where the night hawk loves to rest and hatch her eggs. As the young birds grow to maturity they flutter over the high <sup>rail</sup> ~~road~~ and take wing with their parents into the sky.

Another feathered fellow that can take to city life is the little swift that originally plastered its nest on the inside of a hollowed out stump. As these, as well as forested areas, disappeared through the East the swift found many old chimneys that served the purpose of roosting and nesting places. This bird resembles a swallow, drops into a deserted chimney and builds a strange little basket nest. He brings in some tiny sticks and with sticky saliva from his mouth pastes these and fashions them against the wall. Since a city has many old chimney pots sticking into the sky, this bird became known as the chimney swift, and with an abundance of flying insects it has found a successful and prosperous living place in the midst of a city.

The Vaux swift of the Pacific Coast has not yet turned to chimney swift habits because the hollowed firs and pines are more abundant than city sites.