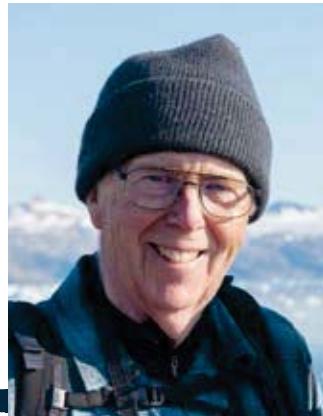


In Praise of Good Neighbours and Friends

By Gord Petersen, 2015 AWA Wilderness and Wildlife Defender



Apparently the last one didn't make it. All summer, my wife Cathy and I watched a pair of Swainson's hawks raise their brood. From little balls of not-particularly-attractive fuzz, to squabbling nest mates, to gangly adolescents exercising their wings in a space that suddenly seemed far too small, we watched as the three youngsters grew.

Dad was handsome enough with his silvery breast and dark hangman's hood, but mom was the real beauty. Significantly larger than dad, she was a uniform chocolate brown, and had a haughty countenance that seemed to say, "Just try me!" Even dad seemed a little intimidated.

As mid-August and the first hints of autumn rolled around, the now adult-sized chicks became restless, and we checked the nest more frequently. Would this be the day they fledged?

And then one day it happened – two of the three young Swainson's were gone. But the third sat on a high branch looking somewhat confused and forlorn. The parents circled and called, but the youngster wouldn't, or couldn't, make the leap. The next day he was still there, looking diminished and lonely, and we silently urged him on. The next day he was gone.

Over the next couple of weeks, we often saw two youngsters within a few hundred metres of the nest, the adults circling and watching, and occasionally delivering food to the still-dependent young. But try as we might, we could never locate all three youngsters at the same time. Before long, the birds were gone, headed for their wintering ground in Argentina. (Argentina! How can they find their way there and back? It's simply astonishing.)

I still feel bad for the youngster who didn't make it and wonder what happened. Was he unable to fly for some reason? Did his siblings outcompete him for food, making him too scrawny and weak to survive? Or, to anthropomorphise things, was he just lacking in nerve and confidence? We'll never know. One thing he did in his short life was to make an impression on us.

Swainson's hawks are part of our busy "neighbourhood". Near the Swainson's nest, we often see a pair of golden eagles whose nest is hidden somewhere northwest of "Eagle Hill". From there, it's around the corner to "Harrier Gap" where these elegant birds with their piercing stare patrol on silent, tipping wings. This is also a good place to check the distant hillside to see if the elk are about, perhaps resting in the warm afternoon sun. A little further along, a pair of bald eagles return each year to raise a family in their shambolic nest knitted into the dead branches of a grand old

cottonwood down by the river. This spring, we watched two grizzly bear cubs wrestle and tumble and play on the bank of that same river, while mom watched with the weary look of tired but proud parents everywhere.

Taking our leave of the eagles, we'll check in with our neighbours on "Bobolink Lane", move on to "Kestrel and Bluebird Way", and then continue to "Ferruginous Ridge". Even if we don't see a ferruginous hawk, there will almost certainly be a red-tailed hawk or two about, perhaps being harried by mischievous ravens. At the end of the road, an osprey pair keeps busy delivering fish to their voracious chick, seemingly unfazed by the traffic zipping by below, or by the cloud of flies buzzing around their heads. As always, Cathy frets about the great streamers of baler twine hanging below the nest ready to ensnare the unwary, or unlucky.

At the edge of an expanse of aspens and willows and hoping for lightning to strike in the same place twice, we'll stop to check the spot where we once locked eyes for a long minute with a cougar and her two blue-eyed kittens. Then it's on to see what the kingbirds are up to along "Kingbird Alley". On another back road, and next to a small pond, a pair of great horned owls raised three youngsters. The long-suffering adult assigned to parent duty would occasionally open a sleep-bleary eye to check on the rambunctious young crashing around in the brush below.

In a very real sense, the Swainson's hawks, the eagles, the cougars, the elk, the grizzly bears, the kingbirds, the owls, and all the rest, are our neighbours and friends. We feel a strong attachment and a sense of responsibility for them. They add life, colour, interest, and comradeship to what would otherwise just be scenery. What would be the point of living here without them?

Beyond that, and perhaps more importantly, they've always been here – this is their home. They belong here. Looking out for them is simply the right thing to do.

Gordon Petersen is an AWA Wilderness and Wildlife Defender award winner, an inspiring conservationist, an activist who motivated communities to care and stand up for the Castle Wilderness. As well as being an avid and highly-skilled wildlife photographer, Gordon is a Past President of the Castle Crown Wilderness Coalition and a director of the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation.