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FIELD NOTES

Red-Tail Dilemma

Anonymous



Red-tailed Hawk mantling a Gray Squirrel. (Photograph by the author.)

I write this anonymously because I'm embarrassed. I understand natural selection, and I believe that humans shouldn't interfere with nature. But one time I just couldn't help but give it a little nudge.

In late June, I received a phone call from a friend who said she saw two Red-tailed Hawk fledglings in a nearby cemetery and she thought they were in trouble. I tried to reassure her; young Red-tails can be loud and their calls sound desperate to the human ear.

It's always fun to watch young birds, so I went to the cemetery to check out my friend's report. I was surprised to see the two young birds huddled together side by side on the ground. It seemed odd; I usually see them perched in a tree, and not typically together. It puzzled me, but I wasn't alarmed.

The next day I drove to the cemetery to see if I could find the young hawks again. They were in the same location. One had died, and the other was eating the carcass.

It was a disturbing sight. It seemed that the adults had not properly cared for their young—perhaps something had happened to one or both of the parents.

I left, but the image of the hungry fledgling haunted me. Later that day, I saw a fresh road-killed squirrel. What a shame for it to go to waste. I picked up the squirrel and drove back to the cemetery.

I had the best intentions. Wild animals shouldn't associate humans with food, so I planned my approach carefully. Hidden in the car, I would drive by and toss the squirrel out of the window onto the lawn. The young bird was where I had last seen it, and the carcass of its sibling was picked to the bone. I drove slowly, picked up the dead squirrel by the tail, and threw. There was an unexpected thud as the squirrel ricocheted off the top of the window frame and plopped onto the middle of the road. The young Red-tail saw the dead squirrel land, leapt onto it, and promptly mantled it.

My plan was blown. The cemetery was fairly busy and I couldn't leave the bird in the middle of road. I got out of the car and tried to flush the bird off the road but it turned its back to me, its wings protecting its prey. I moved closer and closer until I was beside the hawk. I waved my hands; I yelled; I stamped my feet. The hawk ignored me. I realized that the only way to get the hawk safely back on the grass would be to move the squirrel. I leaned over and picked up the squirrel by the tail. Suspended upside down in the mantling position, the Red-tail clung to its prey as I carried the squirrel to the grass and dropped it. Unfazed, the young hawk righted itself to continue mantling.

When I went to the cemetery the next day, I saw no sign of the young hawk—a good sign, I hoped, that it was able to behave normally. I like to think that my interference may have bought it enough time, energy, and even reinforced the behavior it needed to get acclimated to hunting on its own. 🦅

Red-tails Not So in Love

Marsha C. Salett

On a sunny, cold afternoon in late February, I visited the Paintshop Pond restoration area at Wellesley College looking for patches of open water and ducks. Just about everything was frozen, and the ground was covered with more than a foot of hard, icy snow. I was watching the water rushing over the reconstructed dam of the former paint factory when something caught my eye. A Red-tailed Hawk flew over the pond and landed on a horizontal branch of an oak on the opposite shore.

Always appreciative of an opportunity to watch raptors, I watched the motionless hawk through my binoculars for a couple of minutes. I was going to leave when I saw a second Red-tail circling the pond with something in its talons—a dead gray squirrel. The second hawk landed beside the first. Aha, courtship behavior, I thought, and decided to stay. The male placed the squirrel on the branch between himself and the female. Barely moving her head, the female glanced first at the male and then at the