

BOOK REVIEW: *Red-Tails in Love*

by Alden Clayton

Red-Tails in Love, by Marie Winn. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998. 305 pages. \$24.00, hardbound.

Boston has its Peregrines on the Custom House tower. New York has Red-tailed Hawks nesting in Central Park. The courtship, family activities, and fledging success of our Custom House Peregrines have been well documented by the local media. Equivalent histories of the Central Park Red-tails are scarce. Now, the recently published *Red-Tails in Love* tells their story. And even the most die-hard BoSox fans (among whom I am numbered) will have to admit that the hawkwatchers from Yankee-land have a good story.

The story-teller is unusually well qualified. Marie Winn is a member of the Central Park "regulars" and writes a nature column for *The Wall Street Journal*.

Her tale is more than a simple narrative of events. She describes the characteristics of Central Park birding — the places where birds and people congregate, the seasons and the year-round sightings, the onlookers and the passers-by, the Gold Coast apartments abutting the birding areas. She evokes the culture of birding in Central Park — the history, the legends, and the enormously varied and colorful individuals who find and watch birds: the "regulars," who bird virtually every day throughout the year; the "early birds," always first in the field; the "feeding group," who risk cold and ice in winter to maintain the feeding stations; and the "big guns," recognized as ultimate authorities because of their seniority, publications, or status among ornithologists (the American Museum of Natural History and the Central Park Zoo are neighboring resources). In this respect, this book is reminiscent of Jack Connor's *Season at the Point*, a similar account of birds and birding life at Cape May, New Jersey (reviewed in *Bird Observer* in October 1991). The story line of *Red-Tails in Love* (as the title implies) follows the arrival, courtship, nest-building, and ultimately successful rearing of young Red-tails in Central Park — a first-ever event.

The obstacles along the way were both natural and man-made. Author Winn describes them with empathy and a nature writer's sharp eye for details. The central thread of the love story (actually, love stories) is the relationship of Pale Male and the female Red-tails with whom he mated. Pale Male first showed up one autumn as an innocent juvenile: a bird exceptionally light all over, his head almost white and his belly band almost absent — not an albino but certainly pale. Early the following March, a fully mature female appeared in the park and took an instant fancy to the young male resident. After a brief courtship, their relationship was established. The marital consequences are described by the author:

They made an odd couple, a mature female who had hooked up with a young and inexperienced male. His lack of savoir faire was evident: on March 23, as the female was perched on a stanchion in front of the Delacourte Theater below Belvedere Castle, the light-colored Red-tail was observed as he landed on top of her and tried to consummate their union. But he was doing it at the wrong end.

Subsequently, true love and improved technique did prevail, but the initial attempts at nest building also suffered from inexperience. The first nest was poorly built in a tree and fell apart in a strong wind. The second attempt was in another tree, where crows had previously nested, and the "tails" were harassed to distraction. The female crashed into a nearby building and was rushed to rehabilitation emergency. The male also crashed. Fortunately for his story, he recovered quickly and was back in four days, but nesting was over for the season. A single, broken egg was discovered at the base of the nest tree. Hawkwatchers despaired.

But during the following winter, on New Year's Day, Pale Male, now fully mature with a rich red tail, was observed sitting on a limb with a female Red-tail. Could it be his original mate (now referred to as "First Love")? No: First Love was banded during her recovery from rehab, and the new female did not wear a band. A new name was needed. Because of her dark brown color, "Chocolate" was chosen.

The nest site selected by the newly formed pair was unprecedented: atop an ornate twelfth-floor window on one of Fifth Avenue's most exclusive apartment buildings! Dean Amadon, coauthor of the classic book on hawks known simply as "Amadon and Brown," was "stunned" when told. "There have been reports of Red-tails trying to nest on trees in towns — but never on the ledge of a building. I find it amazing." The reaction of Charles Preston, curator of ornithology at the Denver Museum of Natural History and a specialist on Red-tails, was similar. "Are you sure they aren't Peregrine Falcons? I don't know of any other incident where Red-tails have used the side of a building for nesting."

The history-making site created an entirely new set of problems: apartment occupants, apartment managers, and apartment owners. Woody Allen's apartment was above the nest. Did he know? What would be his reaction? Not known as a nature lover, Mr. Allen had in fact been quoted as saying, "I am two with nature." Mary Tyler Moore also lived in the strategically important apartment building. How to ensure their support if a crisis arose about Red-tail nesting rights? Media personalities of their magnitude are normally inaccessible. The challenge for the hawkwatchers was to be sure that these two stars were personally informed about the status and importance of a Red-tail nest on the side of their building.

Contacts were made, via a friend of Mary Tyler Moore's dog-walker and a contractor known to be working on Woody Allen's apartment. In both cases, the

results were favorable. Mary Tyler Moore actually wrote a friendly and reassuring note, and Woody Allen was pleased because he had noticed that the messy pigeons on his balcony had disappeared.

The building managers (at various levels of authority) and the building owner were not as supportive. In fact, the nest was saved only through the intervention of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in the form of a strongly worded letter to the building owner pointing out that removal of the nest would be a violation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and would be subject to a hefty fine — up to \$10,000. There was no further threat.

Two more years of nervous watching and waiting with cycles of excited anticipation and painful disappointment were endured before success was finally achieved. Pale Male and Chocolate had done it! They were the parents of the first Red-tails (three of them) ever to hatch in Central Park.

The story does not end here. Chocolate (“Mom” to her many hawkwatching admirers) was a highway victim in the fall following her successful brood. And who replaced her? None other than First Love! Released four years earlier after successful rehabilitation, she had returned to Central Park for a romantic reunion with Pale Male. (Where had she been in the meantime?)

First Love and Pale Male produced a second successful nesting. But one more twist of the Central Park story remained. First Love perished after eating a poisoned pigeon. Two days after her death, a new female arrived and was soon soaring above the Park with Pale Male. The Queen is dead, long live the Queen!

Red-Tails in Love is full of interesting information and delightful to read. When the spring migration has ebbed and your thoughts turn to a day at the beach, be sure to pack a copy with your picnic lunch.

Alden Clayton is an enthusiastic hawkwatcher. He is familiar with Plum Island, Wachusett Mountain, and Cape May hawking, but not Central Park. This book has inspired him to check it out.