



12 April, 2010

Letter from Lost Prairie

Spring Migrations

“Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things. “ Wild Geese by Mary Oliver.

A couple of weeks ago we held our spring parent workshop. All of you came swooping in from your far-flung lives to Lost Prairie to join our students at Montana Academy. During these three days together we all experienced ourselves as part of a large and vibrant community. It never fails to give me great pleasure to watch parents sitting together with their children in the lodge and to join you in walking down the road as one long, strung-out connected body.

Following the workshop Dr. Cindy Grossman and I drove to the east side of the Rockies to view the annual migration of snow geese on their way from their winter residence in the central valley of California to their breeding grounds in northern Canada. The third week of March they reliably stop over at Freezeout lakes, shallow man-made lakes of snow melt runoff in the gently rolling short grass prairie growing in the rain shadow of the ragged, snowcapped elongated “backbone of the world,” as the Blackfeet called the front range of the Rockies. When we arrived these lakes were dotted white with snowgeese, sleeping and preening, calling to one another in rasping, gossipy cries, after their long journey. Periodically some geese would lift off the lake to eddy and swirl in the air currents, breaking away and rejoining the great flocks strung out across the blue skies. Towards dusk the entire lake lifted off in loose skeins of thousands and flew over our heads

to land in the fields to glean the remains of last year's wheat and barley crops. We also rose to greet the assembled masses on the lake at dawn as they rose as a dense noisy swarm to feed again. It was an exhilarating sight and one which humbles the individual in its collective power.

But Lost Prairie itself is a particularly rewarding place to watch for birds. On the last day of the workshop I noticed the first of the returning meadow larks sitting on a fence post opening its beak to pour forth lovely liquid song. This week there was a flash of iridescent bluebird despite the late snowstorm.

Once I drove into the ranch on a Friday morning to find a huge great grey owl sitting almost 3 feet tall on a stump right outside the ranch house. We watched each other for a while and, after I had parked my car, he was still there. I called the students out of the library to see him and he tolerated their presence within a mere 20 yards, swiveling his head and blinking in the sunlight. The ranch is ideal owl habitat with some large snags and plenty of open marshy ground for rodents. Thirteen of the 15 varieties of owls existing in the continental US are to be found here in Montana. Denver Holt, our local owl expert, has founded The Owl Institute in the Mission Valley and tracks snowy owls from their winter home here to their breeding grounds close to Barrow, Alaska. Some years ago I attended his weekend owl workshop and was rewarded not only by many sightings and the capture of a long eared owl but by the rapture of watching short eared owls courting. This spectacle consists of males flying to a considerable altitude and impressing the females hidden below in the grass by dropping suddenly while clapping their wings beneath their bodies. This scene took place against the awesome backdrop of the toothed Mission range and has long lingered with me.

Birds bring beauty to our lives. We associate them to the times, places and settings in which we experience them, as I have done above. And we are fascinated by their migrations, courtships and song. The glorious film "Winged Migration" following the migrations of various bird species and the extraordinary film of the Emperor Penguins caring for their eggs through the long Arctic winter have entranced millions of us. Birds also provide us with metaphors and images. My father used to refer playfully to my mother as "wuz" (the Arabic for goose) and when I was little he affectionately called me his "ugly duckling." I would have been hurt by this had I not also been taught that ugly ducklings grow up to be swans!

Some of our most moving poetry links us to the kingdom of birds and to our own consciousness:

Wendell Berry's short poem "To Know the Dark" is evocative.

"To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.

To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings".

Back at the ranch David Long spent some time this winter working with his science students to train the ubiquitous campus ravens to come to the porch outside his classroom for food. Now David is turning his attention to designing a morning-long field biology course for our summer block which will look at aquatic ecosystems in and around the ranch, studying food webs, nutrient cycles, predator-prey relationships, human impact and biodiversity. The road into campus crosses the headwaters of the Fisher River, one of the many sources of the Columbia, and floods each spring. We have built up the road but the river still flows abundantly and there are numerous vernal pools around the ranch which attract a wide variety of wild fowl to nest and provide a rich environment of insect and other aquatic life for students to explore.

We encourage students to observe the natural world around them just as we also train them to observe their inner worlds. One of our recent graduates has gone to study vervet monkeys for 5 months in South Africa and sends back copious emails detailing her experiences with both monkeys and humans. She writes "One thing that I have noticed is that most of us come from sort of troubled past. Though I am the only person here who has gone through some form of "treatment," scars on arms, addictions and fronts are easily seen on almost everyone...At times I think that if we all had perfect self-esteem and normal histories this place would suck and the monkeys wouldn't get the love that they do get."

A NY Times Magazine article (January 31, 2010) on ecopsychology - a branch of psychology now taught as part of various college curricula - explores ideas about the impact on humans of living in closer harmony with nature or the lack thereof. This school of thought relies heavily on the ideas of Gregory Bateson, husband of Margaret Mead and a fellow anthropologist writing in the 1970s who emphasized the interdependence of mind and

nature. I can only report that my own life seems both enriched and calmed when I am sensitive to the natural environment in which I live. Many first time visitors to our campus are moved by its beauty and remark that they are not the least surprised to believe that healing occurs in this lovely place. We feel lucky to be able to do our clinical work in this setting and, when students get ready to leave, they note how busy and overwhelming the world outside Lost Prairie feels and express how much they will miss both the natural environment and community of the ranch. It is a pleasure to share it with you all. We hope that you will, like the migrating birds, be regular visitors.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon