



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

7 September 2006

I seem to have entered into a symbiotic relationship with a Red Tailed hawk. Or several hawks. Or maybe even a whole herd of them (herd no doubt being the scientific term for a large group of raptors).

You might think I would know more about something (or things) I am in a relationship with. Or at the very least how many things I am in a relationship with. But really we are not that close. Literally. These are wild birds. They are not going to come and perch on my steering wheel to give me a chance to inspect them. They keep their distance. And since I don't wear my glasses (or binoculars) on the tractor I rarely get near enough to see the kind of detail that would allow me (theoretically, anyway) with any certainty to tell one hawk from another.

I mention what I carry in the way of eyewear on the tractor not because I do all my birding on tractors but because it is my tractor that attracts hawks. Or more accurately, what I do with the tractor that attracts them—though it would not surprise me to learn that hawks around here, like many of other inhabitants, take a keen interest in tractors. In which case the hawks perching near me may be thinking not so much about rodents as about what kind of PTO horsepower a tractor like that would get and that intense predatory stare, rather than scanning the fields for signs of movement, is directed at the various knobs and levers in attempt to discern whether or not I opted for the synchromesh shuttle transmission.

As a matter of fact, I did get the shuttle transmission. The ability to shift between forward and reverse in all twelve gears with a single lever on the steering wheel column makes my time on the tractor a lot easier. For instance, when I am mowing the orchard I can easily scoot back and forth to mow right under the trees. Cutting down the long grass near the tree trunks gives the voles and mice that like to chew fruit tree bark all winter fewer places to hide.

Whether or not the hawks appreciate the way my transmission functions, they certainly like the idea of denying rodents hiding places. Which is why, I assume, every time I mow or plow a hawk will come and perch on a nearby tree or pole, waiting for me to send some creature running across the open ground.

Obviously hawks can hunt without my help. But they appear to have figured out that the big orange noisy thing (that would be my tractor, not me) makes their lives easier. A panicked rabbit fleeing from my tractor across an expanse of freshly plowed dirt is an easy target for an alert Red Tailed hawk, as I have witnessed on several occasions this summer. And I am happy to help. Rodents can do a lot of damage to the crops. The mice and voles chew up the carrots and beets; the rabbits go after all sorts of greens; the rats can destroy a significant part of a winter squash crop in a few nights. I like having some sharp eyed, swift predators pitch in with rodent control. Also, unlike our cats, the hawks do not leave rodent bodies and entrails lying around the house.

I do not wish to overstate the nature of this relationship. There's no mystical connection. I have no idea what goes through their heads and I am not sure they know I

This week's share: Beans, Carrots, Lettuce, Onions, Peppers, Yukon gold potatoes, Squash, Tatsoi, Tomatoes, Parsley

exist except as a puzzling appendage on the tractor (what possible purpose, they ask one another, can that odd piece attached to the steering wheel possibly serve?). Our only bond is an overlapping interest in doing away with rodents in the field and a shared understanding that running the tractor serves some end. Still, it's nice for a change to have a creature on the farm doing something useful. Most of the life forms we run into are busy trying to undo our efforts.

A lot of our work is coming undone these days. But it's hard to blame that entirely on creatures. It has more to do with the fact that it is September and the summer crops have suddenly noticed that the days are shorter and the nights colder. I don't wish to shortchange the cucumber beetles, the squash bugs, the leaf hoppers, the flea beetles: they have all done their best. No doubt they and their various cohorts from the disease realm have hastened the decline of some crops (particularly the squash, cucumbers and tomatoes). But the heat-loving vegetables would be dying back anyway. They know what's coming and they don't want any part of it.

You will notice the effects of this in your share. No more piles of squash (is that cheering I hear?) and tomatoes. Maybe no more cucumbers at all (we are trying to keep the last planting alive long enough for it to produce). Small peppers (but some red ones). On the other hand, some crops, especially the greens, will start to prosper again in the cool weather, and there are fall crops—shell beans, broccoli, rutabagas, winter squash—on the way.

You may also notice a slightly smaller range of crops in your bag. This has to do with the time of year too. In this case, though, it is the academic calendar rather than the climate doing the damage. Greg went back to college on Tuesday so three of us are now trying to do the work of four. The only way for us to come close to keeping up is by doing away with a few tasks. So there will be times we simply won't get around to picking certain crops I consider less than essential, especially if you have already gotten them several times.

If you find this idea distressing (if, for instance, you cannot bear to go without hot peppers) you can do something about it: drive out to the farm any Tuesday or Wednesday and lend a hand with the harvest. We would be thrilled to get some help. More realistically, you could come out to the farm for the work day on the 17th. There are a number of simple tasks we could use some help with. A few beds of carrots and some fall greens should be weeded and there are rows of potatoes to be harvested. I hasten to add, for those of you who have helped with previous potato harvests, that this will not involve the use of pitchforks. I dig up the potatoes with the tractor. They just needed to be picked up and put in sacks. It is easy work and oddly satisfying, especially if you like potatoes as much as Andrea does (I have suggested she compose an ode to potatoes that she can recite at the work day). And it is even more satisfying when there's a crowd of people doing it. A big crew of potato harvesters (or carrot weeders) can make those rows look much shorter. Plus you will get to look around the farm and cheer on all those fall crops and I can show you a shuttle transmission in action. And most likely you will get to watch one of the hawks glaring down from a treetop or swooping low over the field, ready to pluck some unlucky vole from the grass.

Fruit share: Victory plums and Harrow Delight pears from O. A. Borden and Sons, Easton.