



Stags' Leap

THE WISDOM OF RAPTORS

My father had tractor work in the vineyards, rototilling for other people along with our own fields, and he was a humane man. Occasionally his tractor ran over a nest, and he'd stop his machine and get out to check the damage. If there were some eggs that weren't crushed or a baby quail or jack rabbit, he'd tuck it into his shirt and bring it home to me.

Gina Stonis, on the cellar crew at Stags' Leap Winery, has been observing the wildlife on the estate for over six years, and has been rehabilitating wild animals all her life, based on gifts from her father, and her mother's example. Her children do the work with her now, twin girls and a boy. Kids are a lot wiser these days, she says. Everything is eco-sensed with them. Last year they raised crows.

Her dream is to start a wildlife rehabilitation aviary right here, in this place, a study of wind, painted with raptors. Beautiful lift is created by sharp rocky cliffs that heat up rapidly in the Napa sun, tweaking the wind currents. Ask any paraglider: follow the hawks if you want to find lift, but watch out when they start to flap. Vultures are probably better guides to steady lift, says Gina. They're lazy. They don't like to flap much.

People at the winery have gotten to know that she does rehab, and she gets called whenever something's going on with the animals on the property. They're used to her bringing creatures to work that have to be tended or fed on a regular schedule...a baby squirrel or a crow with a damaged wing. There's often a heat box by the bathroom sink.

You'll see blonde coyotes out here, she says. They're almost apricot in color. From her vantage point at the base of the Stags Leap Palisades, the sharp blue air around the immediate crest of rock develops dark, revolving spots—vultures and hawks. A Red Shouldered Hawk perches on a tree about midway up the slope. Notice how much color he's got on his chest? Red Tails aren't so colorful right there. She pats her own chest in



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sympathy. Swainson's Hawks are a little larger. There's a pair of Peregrine Falcons that nest on the palisades, and she's seen Kite Hawks and Kestrels, and one eagle she couldn't identify. It wasn't a Golden; you see those on the other side of the valley. Must be different lift. Hawks will sometimes try to camouflage themselves by soaring with the buzzards. Squirrels and rabbits seem to know the buzzards aren't interested in them, and they'll make the mistake of coming out into the open. She has seen it happen time and again.

You can tell a hawk is high when it disappears from view of the naked eye. That's approximately 3,000 feet in a cloudless sky. Soaring at 1,000 feet, a hawk can take in 39 square miles, which would pretty much allow it to grasp the entire 240 acres of the Stags' Leap estate, and with its ability to spot another hawk 7 miles away, it's probably got a pretty good view of its next meal.

Dick Wolf, who does the welding of the catwalks in the cellars once spent a few days out here by himself, a weekend or holiday. Gina never saw him look so shaken afterward. He said he saw three hawks dive on a cat and there wasn't much left of it afterward except a head and some of the spine. They must have been a parent and two babies, out on a training mission. It's hard to keep cats out here because of that. It's too bad; they're good for hunting the rodents.

She wasn't always working cellar crew. She used to have a full blown career as a cook and caterer. A friend of hers was working the crush out here. His car broke down, and one day she gave him a ride to work. As soon as she drove in and saw the setting: craggy palisades hovering over a secluded valley, she took a job, just for the harvest. She's been here ever since.

When the cellar crew lays out the pomace in the vineyard after harvest, hawks will come and hover behind the tractor. The rumble stirs up the rodents and makes great hunting. The hawks don't seem to mind the noise of the machine; they've gotten used to it. It's



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predictable. Not like the blasting for the new cave; that was too extreme, too violent. The Red Tails that used to nest on the drive left, and haven't come back. It's tough; a working wine estate means that there are the means to preserve the open land, and there's also the disruption that comes from growth. She wants to see to it that as much of the wildlife can co-exist with the people as possible, and that the people are sensitive to the homes of the creatures they work around every day.

Recently, a young Red Tail Hawk got stuck in the old cellar. He was flying around and around and he couldn't seem to find the doorway, which is huge, a two-story arch with the paneled oak doors flung open. The only way she could help him was to chase him all over until he tired himself out. It took a while, but finally he did get down on the floor and was scrambling around. When she got hold of him, he put his head back and fanned his face feathers out, and he just lay there looking at her, didn't move a muscle, didn't try to bite. She picked him right up. He thought he was toast. She laughs, in wonder and admiration that such a beautiful and fierce creature could imagine she wanted to harm him in any way. It's part of the paradox in her line of work, one of the moments when creatures look each other in the eye and from the perspective of an interested bystander, it might have been hard to determine who was being rescued right there.

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