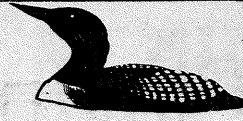


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

One of the saddest sights you can see in the North Country is a flight of Canada geese, heading south, while you have to stay where you are and watch them go.

There was such a flight the other day, heading south by southeast; a little flight of seven birds, high up, their honking drifting down to me like the far-off baying of hounds on the hunt.

They moved leisurely, a not-too-tight formation, "loose as geese"—not a frantic fleeing from shotguns and storms—just movin' on, because it was getting time to be movin' on, and this was a nice, cool morning for traveling.

I don't know if they were bound for southern Illinois or just south Milwaukee, but the clocks that ticked in them, and in me, ticked in synchronization, and there was the shared realization that in the weeks to come, the mornings would grow cooler, the flights would grow larger, and when they were beyond the snowline, we would be here, with the winter.

Wild Goose, Brother Goose, Mel Ellis once wrote.

My heart knows what the wild goose knows, Frankie Laine used to sing.

The vagabond birds appeal to the gypsy in our souls because their song is of freedom, their flight is of freedom, and I think we envy and also resent them, because they are not bound to the earth as we know we are.

Sigurd Olson tells of wanting to kill a wild goose as a boy because the sound of wild geese on the move haunted him, and he felt that somehow he had to capture some of their mystery, some of their freedom and some of the blue distances into which they disappeared. He recalls that the idea grew into an obsession, and he used to lie awake at night, dreaming and planning how he would bring that about.

"I do not believe," he says now, "that there was ever a boy who wanted to kill a goose as badly as I did."

Sigurd never did kill a goose, and now that he's "older and a little wiser," he thinks he knows the reason.

"As I look back," he says, "I could comfort the boy I was. I could tell him that one should never try to capture something as wild and beautiful as the calling of geese, that it is better to wait and listen as they go by and wonder where they have gone."

Maybe it's because great minds move along the same paths that Aldo Leopold says much the same thing when he describes long, windy waves surging across the grassy sloughs of the marsh, beating against the far willows.

On the sandbar, there is only wind, he notes, and the river sliding seaward. Every wisp of grass is drawing circles on the sand. He wanders over the bar to a driftwood log, where he sits and listens to the universal roar, and to the tinkle of wavelets on the shore. The river is lifeless; not a duck, heron, marshhawk or gull but has sought refuge from the wind.

Then, out of the clouds, he hears a faint bark, as of a faraway dog.

"It is strange," he says, "how the world cocks its ears at that sound, wondering."

Soon, the sound is louder: the honk of geese, invisible, but coming on.

The flock emerges from the low clouds, a tattered banner of birds, dipping and rising, blown up and blown down, blown together and blown apart, but advancing, the wind wrestling wing. When the flock is a blur in the far sky, Aldo hears the last honk, sounding taps for the summer.

"It is warm behind the driftwood now," he concludes, "for the wind has gone with the geese. So would I—if I were the wind."

It was Aldo Leopold, of course, who captured not only the great mystery of the wild geese, but their great message.

In the beginning, he writes, there was only the unity of the Ice Sheet. Then followed the unity of the March thaw, and the northward hegira of the international geese. Every March since the Pleistocene, the geese have honked unity, from China Sea to Siberian Steppe, from Euphrates to Volga, from Nile to Murmansk, from Lincolnshire to Spits-

bergen. Every March since the Pleistocene, the geese have honked unity from Currituck to Labrador, Matamuskeet to Ungava, Horseshoe Lake to Hudson's Bay, Avery Island to Baffin Land, Panhandle to Mackenzie, Sacramento to Yukon.

By this international commerce of geese, the waste corn of Illinois is carried through the clouds to the Arctic tundras, there to combine with the waste sunlight of a nightless June to grow goslings for all the lands between. And, in this annual barter of food for light, and winter warm for summer solitude, the whole continent receives as net profit a wild poem dropped from the murky skies upon the muds of March.

March is a full five months, an incredible season from now, and already the geese are going the other way. *Away from us.*

*The coming and going of the great gray geese
from the rim lip of the glacier land
They cross the Chain of Lakes like clouds
High blowing and rolling for The South.
Stringing down the big, big river
Right on by the river towns
following out the flyways.*

*The winter people watching them go.
The north sky clobbering up for snow.*

*God go with you, strong flights.
Old Wind: hear out these worlds.
The brave birds are my brothers.*

*Higher up: fifty thousand feet,
the Strategic Air Command bomber,
flying. Loafing. And going up to look
at the Hudson Bay.*