

# Watching Hawks Like Hawks

Pondering the  
majesty of the redtail.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**W**e were up in coulee country Sunday morning, sitting on the ice watching for fish, and high in the tree line a redtail hawk was sitting on a branch watching for God knows what. "We attend services," Steady Eddy says, "in our own idiosyncratic ways."

Bud said that while he waited for us to drive into the valley he was having coffee in the "sweet spot" next to the wood stove, watching the winter birds at the feeder out-

grouse were nervously feeding, and the covey flushed and streaked away to a jungle of bushes partway up the far hill, above and beyond the outbuildings, a city block or so from the feeders.

"The grouse dived into the brushy cover," Bud says, "just a tangle of branches and twigs, and the hawk just could not get in there. Talk about frustration. That hawk finally flew to a high branch and sat there, watching. Waiting, I think, for the grouse to come out into the open. But they never did while the hawk was sitting there. Finally, the hawk left."

Bud said the hawk this Sunday morning up in the tree line didn't seem to be watching like the one that chased the grouse. As a matter of fact, this hawk didn't seem to be hunting at all. It was just sitting.

"This hawk," Bud said, "has been sitting there for hours, in the same spot. Never moves."

**O**n the ice, we drilled out a half dozen holes and at first sat on the plastic pails with our faces to the bright sun. We were all facing the same way—the redtail up in the trees and the redfaces down on the ice.

Then I moved to another hole and sat on the pail so I could see the redtail just below the skyline. It was in the same position. I don't think it had moved a feather. It looked like it was carved into a tree, like some totem of a tribe that worshiped redtail hawks.

That got me to thinking of August Derleth, because if ever there was anyone who worshiped redtail hawks it was Augie. I remember standing with his friends at a memorial service at his grave site in Sauk City when there appeared in the blue sky above one, two and then three redtail hawks circling high over the cemetery, over Augie's grave. Someone said it was like that "missing man" formation that pilots do to mark a lost comrade. On that day, we knew instinctively who the "missing man" was. I like to think those hawks, too, knew who their missing comrade was.

"What is it about hawks," Augie Derleth wrote in his beautiful book *Walden West*, "that strikes the note of kinship with which I am always moved at the sight of them—a feeling amounting almost to the conviction of sharing the hawk's solitude as well as its ecstasy in flight, which enables me to float aloft while I am prone upon a hilltop, watching that magnificent bird ride the air currents invisible to any human eye, high up remote in heaven? Surely, the hawk is master of all it sees—as much king of his domain as its majesty implies!

"It soars, it floats, it circles, turns, vaults, dives—it makes all sky and cloud, wind and air its own. The hawk which thus for these hours belongs to me, also claims me for its own without more than a cursory awareness of my existence...."

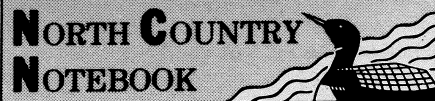
We fished until noon and caught one fish. Then we walked stiffly off the ice to have our lunch in the old farmhouse. Up in the tree line, the hawk had not moved. We ate venison sausage, homemade rhubarb sauce, drank coffee in that wood stove corner. The hawk had not moved. We walked loosely onto the ice, fished until the sun was dropping and the holes were freezing over. We caught another fish.

When we drove out of the valley, the

hawk was still there. It had not moved. I suggested it might be fasting up there, enduring deprivation, cold, suffering—to have a Vision.

"Naw," Steady Eddy said. "It already has one." ■

*George Vukelich reads selections from North Country Notebook Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. on Wisconsin Public Radio, WHA (970 AM).*



side. That's when he noticed a bright white spot up in the far trees as the sun flashed off it.

He said the bright white spot wasn't moving at all, and if you had never seen that sight before it surely could seem strange, unnatural, out of place, until you saw it through your field glasses. Then you would know that the white spot was a hawk—a redtail—sitting up there in the trees. About the same time, your mind would tell you that a redtail hawk sitting high up in the tree line at the top of the valley—on a ridge that surveyed the whole valley below—was the most natural thing a hawk could do on a cold, sunny February Sunday in Wisconsin.

Bud said that oftentimes the hawks come hunting around the bird feeders because there's so much activity swirling around them, so many birds feeding.

"Even the grouse come," Bud says. "They're more wary than the songbirds and don't like to be out in the open. They stay near cover, low branches, bushes. They stay near safety."

Grouse feed furtively, quickly, as if expecting an attack at any moment. Sometimes they are dead right.

Bud says he once saw a redtail swoop down at the feeders under which five or six