

Something out of the ordinary

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North Country Notebook

By George Vukelich

I walked the oak woods the other day and something happened that has never happened before on any of the walks taken over a lifetime.

Without the sun, even at mid-day the air flowed around my face like ice water. The absence of light drained the life from the landscape, leaving that silvery grey cast that Sleepy Ed up in the Chain of Lakes Country always called, "casket colored." The snow creaked and crunched under the clubby shoe pacs.

I broke trail for a long time in the shadowless sea.

Lost in thought. Lost in time. Head down. Mindless perhaps. Not aware. Trudge. Drudge. Trudgery. Drudgery.

And then that familiar spooky feeling of being watched echoed through my brain case like a

whisper through a darkened cavern. I looked up.

There it was. A crow. Huge. perched above my head. Looking down at me. Absolutely motionless. Absolutely silent.

The sentinel crow, entrusted with the safety of the flock, discovered derelict. Caught off guard. Surprised.

But you don't surprise sentinel crows when you're dressed like a Christmas tree, struggling through the snowcrust like a thousand-pound moose.

I was witnessing something

unusual. Something out of the ordinary. Something strange.

And even as the whisper in the cavern increased, suddenly other crows came flying to the sentinel's tree and to the trees around it.

They came by twos and threes and then they were dozens.

Gliding down softly as a snowfall. Sitting as silently as stones.

All watching me.

The great carrion feeders, Nature's cleanup crews. "The undertakers" Sleepy Ed called them and he was right.

I had seen these very crows all my life, in all seasons, summer and

snow. I even wrote of them only last winter:

One eventually comes to respect the scavengers. They go about their work with an almost ritualistic dignity. They are professional, correct, estimating the logistics in disposing of the dead thing before them. And then they proceed to pick out its eyes.

They began to talk to each other and I knew they knew Something I was too dumb and sophisticated to learn.

After awhile, they flew away as they had come. Unhurried. Silently. With a certain dignity. A certain nobility.

When they had gone and the sentinel tree stood empty, I sensed that I would see them again one day. Close above me. Close enough to touch.

And I would not be surprised.