

## **Close Encounters of the Heron Kind**

It was a beautiful fall day. I was reading on our front porch. The air was a distillation of late summer, and the sky was that particularly pure and perfect fall blue which I'd become accustomed to in our Oregon valley. It was very quiet on the 1200-acre ranch we took care of.

I looked up and noticed a movement in the sky. A bird made headway toward me, moving its wings in the steady, heavy sweepings of a big bird, perhaps a crane. It flew in from the west, made almost a right-angle turn at the barn, and proceeded toward the porch. It was still too far away for me to tell what it was. I went back to my reading, unconcerned. In the valley we had sandhill cranes who traveled back and forth over the house, to and from their nesting and feeding grounds. I supposed it was one of those, en route.

I couldn't concentrate on my reading, though. Whatever it was had captured my attention. I put aside my books and watched. The bird advanced. Its purposeful wing-stridings through the sky stood in bold contrast to the lazy circling of hawks and the lazy swooping of swallows. I was sure now that it wasn't a crane. I remembered that they flew back to their nests in the early evening, together, from the field down below the house. This was another caller, a stranger, and yet one with such a purposeful air that he might as well be carrying a calling card.

Excitement built in me, and a feeling of expectancy. My visitor flew closer, and I saw that it was a great blue heron. Its neck was bent back upon itself in the S shape characteristic of herons in flight, and I was just able to see the gray-blue of its wings.

Hérons are usually reticent birds. In the eight years we'd lived in the valley I'd only seen a few, always down by the river or over in the timber where they nested. They always flew away when I appeared. I'd never come close to one, but I'd watched their elegant progress in flight from a distance. Now I watched one close the distance between us at a rapid, almost alarming, rate.

As it came closer in a most determined way, I was terrified and elated at its approach. It was too close now for me to think that it might veer away. Our meeting seemed inevitable. Should

I jump up and run in the house to avoid having a lap full of heron? What would a lap full of heron be like? Ungainly, awkward at best, all wings and claws and beak, not pettable at all.

Now I heard the surge of its wings and saw the small brown speckles all along its graceful neck. Its steady, rhythmic approach was breathtakingly beautiful. I no longer thought at all of leaving. As the heron approached it took on more mystery, beauty, and power. The immense, six-foot wing span overwhelmed our tiny porch, and me with it. I felt a great sense of expectancy, stillness, and waiting, a quiet aliveness, and a feeling of being absorbed in the present moment.

The heron flew down, dipped its long neck to look in on me, and then, just before hitting the overhang of the porch roof, it swooped up and over the house and was gone.

Dreams sometimes seem more real than daily life, and daytime experiences can take on a dream-like flavor. Happenings have layers of meaning beyond surface content. A flight of geese becomes a poem in motion. There are times when logical explanations based on instinctive behavior break down, when we experience more closeness with other creatures than we had imagined possible.

It seemed to me that the heron came just to look in on me and say hello. I've seen other herons since then, all busy on heron errands and ignoring the woman below them. They seem unaware that I have a heron calling card. I hope that some day one of them will make rapid progress towards me. I hope that I will stop whatever I'm doing and wait, with a feeling of terror, expectancy, and elation, for this experience to lift me out of the bounds of what I'd thought possible into another realm, where heron and woman may meet and talk together.