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Scrapers of Sky

Know this Primal Power
that guides without forcing
that serves without seeking
that brings forth and sustains life
yet does not own or possess it

—TAO TE CHING, verse 10

Skyscrapers and canyon cliffs are not typically associated with each other. We are trained to think of wild, river-sculpted landscapes as sites where human traces remain only as faint boot prints or the scattered ashes of a campfire. Habitat is habitat, though. Peregrine falcons, who have begun to nest in and hunt the accidental canyons of the city, seem to know this.

A Chicagoan doesn't need carabiners, a harness, and climbing ropes to see peregrines *in situ*. The ability to ascend a flight of stairs will do. My local public library hosts a peregrine pair who have repurposed a cement nook beside a third-floor window as their aerie. During the spring and early summer, a live "falcon cam" broadcasts

the parents' daily fussing over their eggs, and later, when hatched, their fledglings. Affectionately named Nona and Squawker, the peregrine couple returned to raise a new set of chicks for the thirteenth time this year.

Nona and Squawker are one power couple among many in the Chicagoland area. Across Illinois, more than two dozen peregrine pairs are monitored by the Field Museum, and the majority of their aerie sites are in Chicago and its suburbs. Peregrine nests are in the South Loop, Waukegan, Calumet, Millennium Park, on Wacker Drive, and at the Uptown Theater, among other urban locations. They've found Chicago homey enough.

For other city animals, peregrines are cause for concern. There goes the neighborhood. A peregrine attack is called a "stoop," a dive-bomb technique that the raptor uses to surprise other birds from above, stunning or tearing at targets that can be the size of a sandhill crane. Incongruous as it may seem to have a bird in the city that can reach speeds of over two hundred miles per hour as he or she drops toward a prey animal—three times faster than a cheetah's top speed—this wild aviator is in our midst.

I'm an amateur birder at best, appreciative of serendipitous moments with the avian world. I'm an onlooker more than a life lister. Birds of prey, however, hold a particular fascination for me. When I found out that peregrines were nesting in the same place I fail to return books in a timely manner, I got a twofer: I paid the raptors a visit and then made use of my library card, turning to a classic source for understanding peregrines' daily lives, J. A. Baker's natural history classic *The Peregrine*.

Set in coastal southeastern England and published in 1967, Baker's book provides a remarkable literary account of one man's obsession with peregrines. Early on, Baker observes that the differences in British landscapes are "subtle, coloured by love." His writing style takes on the affects of the birds he so closely observes: mostly spare, few wasted strokes, each word alive with precision and calculated beauty, at times sweeping over the landscape and then ranging upward in transcendent spirals. The meat of the book, where the reader

1 follows Baker as he becomes more and more intimate with the nu-
2 ances of the birds as well as the shifting moods of the land, induces
3 a hypnotic effect. Baker unfurls a poetics of place, washing familiar
4 scenes with new resonances.

5 Baker's eye for the individuating detail is honed by his inter-
6 actions with the peregrines themselves. As he observes: "Hawk-
7 hunting sharpens vision. Pouring away behind the moving bird, the
8 land flows out for the eye in deltas of piercing colour. The angled eye
9 strikes through the surface dross as the obliqued axe cuts to the heart
10 of a tree. A vivid sense of place grows like another limb." As he comes
11 to understand the behaviors and personality quirks of particular per-
12 egrines, Baker's prose absorbs the birds' sense of immediacy: "What
13 is, is now, must have the quivering intensity of an arrow thudding
14 into a tree. Yesterday is dim and monochrome. A week ago you were
15 not born. Persist, endure, follow, watch." The narrative also pays trib-
16 ute to the landscape—its subtle tonal shifts, violence, and ceaseless
17 movement of color, light, and shadow. Wandering through wood-
18 lands and farm-studded estuaries over the span of only a few winter
19 months, Baker offers a keen-eyed perspective applicable to any land-
20 scape at any time, including cities such as Chicago, where peregrines
21 increasingly fledge their young and cleave the air with their wings: "I
22 have tried to preserve a unity, binding together the bird, the watcher,
23 and the place that holds them both."¹ Could we learn to see a city as
24 a peregrine does? Would this perspective bind us to a new vision of
25 what a city can be?

26 Baker wrote *The Peregrine* in the late 1960s. At the time, per-
27 egrines in England were winking out, their nervous systems fatally
28 compromised by pesticides, their DDT-thinned eggshells too weak to
29 hold a baby bird to term. In the United States, once denial turned to
30 alarm about DDT's pervasive impacts, it was banned in 1972. Around
31 the same time, the Endangered Species Act solidified critical federal
32 protections and sparked a desire for peregrine recovery. In the 1980s,
33 researchers began to raise peregrines for release. The results of these
34 efforts can be seen streaking between the buildings: peregrines are in
35 the city's canyons, on the hunt again.

“Oooo! Oooo! Oooo!” My colleague Anja Claus reminds me when I forget. “Oooo! Oooo! Oooo!” has become her way of alerting workmates to the thrilling fact that a peregrine is circling. On the twenty-eighth floor of the Civic Opera Building, we have an excellent view of the South Branch of the Chicago River as well as the spread of the city’s canyons to the west-northwest. We hurry to the windows, craning our necks skyward for the distinctive silhouette, the boomerang of wings with a bend in the middle, the tapering wedge of tail feathers. “Oooo! Oooo! Oooo!” is the appropriate response to a creature who arcs between buildings with such grace.

The scientist in Chicago who may know more about these wild birds than anyone else is Mary Hennen, a collections assistant at Chicago’s Field Museum and a self-described “liaison” between peregrines and the many volunteer bird monitors who have taken an interest in them. In addition to managing the Field Museum’s bird “library”—a collection with close to half a million specimens representing around 90 percent of the species in the world—Mary has been doing peregrine research for almost twenty-five years. Ornithology, however, wasn’t what she had her sights set on in 1987, when she was fresh out of school with a biology degree from the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point. Her volunteer work at both the Chicago Academy of Sciences and, soon after, the Field Museum, led her into the enthusiastic orbit of a couple of top-notch ornithologists. Mary describes her good fortune as a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Her budding scientific research career intersected with the first peregrine releases in Illinois, an effort to recover peregrine populations in a region that, as in all areas east of the Rockies, lacked peregrines by the 1960s. Before reintroductions, the last peregrine nest in Illinois was recorded in 1951.

When the first releases occurred, the team at the Chicago Academy of Sciences had modest hopes: three breeding pairs in the state. There are now close to thirty. Most of the peregrines in Illinois maintain year-round territories, but some have lived up to their scientific name (*Falco peregrinus*, Latin for “wandering falcon”), dispersing as far as Ecuador and Venezuela. In 1999, peregrines were delisted from

1 the national endangered and threatened species lists; in Illinois, the
2 birds dropped from endangered to threatened status in 2004, and in
3 2015 they were also delisted. By any measure, this is a high-profile
4 species success story, and Mary has been instrumental in monitoring
5 and assisting in the peregrines' progress.

6 Mary's work comes with hazards. As we speak, she reaches un-
7 derneath her desk and retrieves a bicycle helmet. The helmet, she ex-
8 plains, keeps the crown of her head buffered from the taloned fists of
9 aggressive peregrine mothers and fathers, who are not nearly as in-
10 terested as researchers in the scientific benefits of having their babies
11 banded for monitoring purposes. Mary has adapted, too. Because
12 peregrines are drawn to the highest point of an uninvited guest, a
13 whiskbroom held aloft by a partner is one way of keeping her head
14 free of peregrine-induced lumps, as well as keeping the birds free of
15 injury.

16 Mary shies from taking credit for the success of peregrines in this
17 area. She is particularly sensitive to instances when people describe
18 peregrine releases with words such as *place* or *put*. The agency of the
19 birds, their wildness, is a quality she holds in high esteem. "They are
20 wild birds, they go where they want," she explains. "It's the birds find-
21 ing places to breed on their own and doing that successfully."

22 Other than the wild tenacity of the birds, a key factor for their suc-
23 cess may be the city itself. Peregrines are historically cliff-dwelling
24 raptors, and as Mary observes, "If you think of the city, it's nothing
25 but a pseudo-cliff, with lots of ledges, ample prey, and no competition
26 for use of the space."

27 Conservation scientists sometime refer to human-built envi-
28 ronments and structures that other species utilize as "habitat ana-
29 logues." Peregrines reveal how such analogues can be critical to rare
30 or threatened species. In plain speak, humans build stuff that other
31 animals will use. The presence of peregrines in Chicago sheds light
32 on a larger phenomenon—and perhaps an important new mind-
33 set—called *reconciliation ecology*.

34 *Restoration ecology*, in fits and starts, has become a major piece
35 of conservation practice. Chicago is an epicenter of citizen-led res-

toration projects, which can be traced back to early attempts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to re-create or expand the habitat of conservative prairie flora. Restoration ecology, defined succinctly, is the (often sweat-intensive) process of bringing a historical ecosystem or landscape back to a condition resembling its former functionality and diversity.²

Reconciliation ecology—a term coined by evolutionary ecologist Michael Rosenzweig—“is the science of inventing, establishing, and maintaining new habitats to conserve species diversity in places where people live, work, or play.”³ In his book *Win-Win Ecology*, Rosenzweig offers up several case studies to consider, situations in which people both intentionally and unintentionally have created critical habitat for other species while still making a living themselves: ongoing red-cockaded woodpecker habitat management on an active air force base in northern Florida; Chiricahua leopard frog recovery conducted by a coalition of ranchers in the American Southwest; and a reconstructed pseudo-salt marsh that is a boon for migrating birds in Eilat, Israel. All share a common thread: with the proper adjustments and adaptations, humans can live—and make a living—alongside other species, and both can thrive. So while restoration ecology involves diminishing human impact in particular places so that other beings can thrive or reestablish themselves, reconciliation ecology advances the position that humans can create and build novel systems that are suited to other species. In short, by understanding the behaviors of other species and what they require to meet their needs, we can deliberately create places of cohabitation.

Reconciliation ecology will work for some species and not others, so conservation still needs restoration and preservation in its tool kit to accommodate different species. Many rare and threatened grassland birds in the greater Chicago region, for instance, cannot survive without large, contiguous natural areas for their breeding and nesting sites. Rosenzweig, however, has strong words for conservationists whom he believes have misdirected their energies. By focusing on setting aside unpopulated acreages as a last hope, he argues, conservation efforts tend to neglect areas that could put us into

1 daily contact with wild animals. Maybe the preservationist strategy
2 was an appropriate response at one time, but the world has grown
3 smaller as the human population has grown larger. Large, protected
4 nature reserves remain crucially important to some species, but as
5 Rosenzweig puts it: “We must abandon any expectation that reserves
6 by themselves, whether pristine or restored, will do much more
7 than collect crumbs. They are the 5 percent. We need to work on the
8 95 percent.”⁴

9 The city makes up part of this 95 percent and presents a trove of
10 possibility. As Rosenzweig’s research attests, we may be surprised
11 at what kind of wild animals will live among us or in close proxim-
12 ity to us, if given the opportunity. In this respect, perhaps peregrine
13 falcons should be the poster animal for reconciliation ecology in the
14 many city skies they’ve reclaimed. From Nottingham, England, to
15 Hong Kong, peregrines are on the hunt.

16 A short walk from where Mary Hennen, the peregrine expert,
17 works at the Field Museum there is a piece of land that extends into
18 Lake Michigan called Northerly Island. When I am anywhere near
19 the eastern edge of downtown Chicago, I make an effort to go there,
20 seeking refuge for my senses. Not coincidentally, so do other ani-
21 mals. Northerly Island might be one of the more striking examples
22 of reconciliation ecology in the heart of the city.

23 The island, which is actually a human-made peninsula, reminds
24 me that the city is a place of constant change, and with the right
25 intention that change can benefit both humans and other species.
26 Northerly contains several dozen acres of rolling prairie, thought-
27 fully planted and beautifully diverse, and an unbeatable view of the
28 liquid expanse of Lake Michigan to the east. To the west, across an
29 hourglass-shaped harbor, one can see Soldier Field (and hear the
30 ocean roar of fans when the Bears are playing at home on Sunday).
31 To the northwest is Chicago’s downtown skyline.

32 One hundred years ago, there was no island here at all, only open
33 water. Northerly represents the fruits of lakeshore planning and
34 beautification inspired by the visionary architect Daniel Burnham.
35 Visionary plans don’t always make it past the drafting table, however.

The sole portion of the six-mile parkway Burnham proposed that was actually built was Northerly Island, so named because it was the northernmost point in that grand plan.

If you stood on this spot in 1933, you would have been shouldering your way between crowds of people and architecturally daring buildings, celebrating the second World’s Fair hosted by Chicago (the Century of Progress International Exposition). By 1948, you would have been dodging small aircraft, for Northerly Island had become Meigs Field, a single runway airport that catered to businesspeople, commuters, and state politicians. So it was for over fifty years. Sometime in the middle of the night on March 30, 2003, however, you would have been avoiding bulldozers as they tore X’s into the airstrip, signaling the demise of Meigs Field. In a controversial move, Mayor Richard M. Daley chose to forgo further negotiations about the airport lease and reclaimed the island on behalf of the city for its original purpose as parkland.

Because it is situated along a major bird migration pathway, Northerly offers a welcoming site for long-distance flyers who hug the coast of Illinois as they follow the Lake Michigan shoreline. Though modestly sized, the patch of land provides significant habitat for rest and refueling, now for birds instead of airplanes. Some avian visitors linger for longer stretches of time. Northerly is one of the few places near downtown Chicago where you might hear the song of a grassland denizen such as a dickcissel or see the flash of a kingbird’s tail as she picks off insects between tree branches. Other visitors one wouldn’t expect in Chicago—including short-eared owls, northern shrikes, horned grebes, bluebirds, and even an occasional snowy owl down for a visit from the Arctic—are known to make stops at the island as well. I’ve spotted a muskrat paddling the five-acre lagoon at the island’s center, and, considering the gaggles of Canada geese who regularly promenade along the island pathways, Northerly must make an alluring coyote hunting ground.

A visit to this downtown island provides an echo of what portions of Chicago looked, felt, and smelled like before there was a Northerly Island, before there was even a Chicago. Northerly suggests the many

1 ways that a city can accommodate itself to other species. Some ani-
2 mals, like peregrines, chimney swifts, and cliff swallows, adapt well
3 to the structures we build. Some animals, like coyotes, raccoons, and
4 opossums, if they can stay out of harm's way, do a fairly good job of
5 making use of what is on offer at ground level. Places such as North-
6 erly Island provide for those animals who cannot tolerate a great deal
7 of human disturbance yet are still willing to venture within close
8 proximity of the city if the conditions are right.

9 The juxtaposition of skyscrapers to prairie, separated by a thin
10 slice of water, indicates different forms of control and letting go. The
11 peregrines, once they were released from the deadly grip of DDT,
12 adapted to our built environment. Northerly takes reconciliation a
13 step further, offering a thriving prairie savanna where once concrete
14 and airplanes dominated.

15 Reconciliation ecology. I feel we are capable of it when I stand on
16 the shores of Northerly Island, gazing at the Chicago skyline, hop-
17 ing to see a crescent-shaped bird speeding through skyscrapers in the
18 distance.

19 There is a good deal to learn from reconciling our needs with the
20 needs of other species. Small-scale instances of reconciliation occur
21 every day in school gardens, in backyards, on green rooftops, and
22 atop abandoned "L" platforms. Reconciliation can happen at larger
23 scales through the ongoing work to reclaim brownfields, creatively
24 alter postindustrial sites, and connect green infrastructure and ri-
25 parian habitats through the heart of the city.

26 When other animals are in our midst, their lives mean more than
27 something in a textbook, a children's story, or a *National Geographic*
28 special. Active reconciliation means trying to understand what en-
29 ables other animals to flourish in our presence, and how we can pro-
30 actively create such places of cohabitation. This can foster ecological
31 empathy, opening up a space for the long-term work of living with
32 grace and skill in our everyday worlds. Reconciliation ecology asks of
33 us that we anticipate the impacts of our actions and take responsibil-
34 ity for our historical shortsightedness. Maybe it also asks that we say
35 "Oooo" when we witness a miracle in the sky.



Every time I walk by the Evanston Public Library, I look up at the third floor, just in case. On rare occasions, I've been rewarded by the sight of Nona—or maybe it's Squawker—gripping a corner of the building, framed by blue sky. A slate-gray head with the distinctive black “moustache” streaked across the bird's cheeks. A deep pool of eye, rimmed by bright yellow, returning my gaze. People hurry past me, not looking up, not even looking at the odd man on the sidewalk looking up.

In *The Peregrine*, Baker reminds his readers, “The hardest thing of all to see is what is really there.” Peregrines are here, although many people may be unaware of their return to the city's canyons. Made to cut the air, they circle above downtown streets, offering a glimpse of the changing ecology of cities—a reconciliation of our habitat and theirs.

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