

Tuesday, 11 September 2001

Tuesday morning began as it always did for us, with a bird walk in Central Park. We met at the north end of the park, and for the first half hour or so things were normal. It was then that we began to hear sirens outside the park, then on the park drives. The wailing was relentless.

We finally learned what had happened when Joanne Wassmer spoke via phone to a business associate. At first we first believed that only the Pentagon and perhaps the Stock Exchange on Wall Street had been attacked. Then Joanne turned on a radio. The first words we heard were that both World Trade Center towers had collapsed. Like everyone else we were stunned. Some of us cried.

As a group we became puzzled as to what to do next. We wanted quiet, and we wanted calm, but the sirens kept wailing. A few of us wanted to go home; others wanted to walk south in the park. Some wanted to be alone, and others needed to be close to friends. Emotions ran high, then low. I remember watching a Black-and-white Warbler on a green leaf just a couple of feet from me and thinking that it didn't matter. Other warblers surrounded us chittering. We were immersed in a small bird wave in those north woods, but we still felt desolate. Time seemed to slow down, and the light cutting through the trees onto our path was surreal like the light from an eclipse. It was difficult to decide what to do next. We needed to stay together, but other than that, we needed a purpose. In some ways we wanted to hide, but we needed to move too.

Our thoughts turned to people we knew who worked in that part of lower Manhattan: Barbara Saunders at Chase, and Rebecca Creshkoff too. We tried thinking of others who worked "there". It really hit home when we began running through the names of the birders we knew, trying to remember where exactly they worked and what they did. I thought of Carl Howard, his wife Cindy, and their two little children. They live on Nassau Street just northeast of the WTC. I did not want to believe that I might never see them again.

We decided to head south. We needed to get people back to the west side so that they could get home. Ruth Rosenthal needed to get to her bicycle first. We made sure that no one left the park alone; everyone went home with a friend.

Meanwhile, Ardith Bondi was trying to get through to her boyfriend to find out more information, to make sure he was okay, and to tell him that she was okay too. She handed the

phone to others: Jennifer Uscher needed to call her new fiancé Jason. It would take her quite awhile to finally get through. He had been worried that our group somehow had met at the Brooklyn Bridge that day to look for peregrines just as we do in the spring. Worry was still in the air however, since Jennifer's father was working at the Pentagon. I tried calling Debs in the Bronx a number of times but only got busy signals. Emergency vehicles continued rushing south down the West Drive. I will always remember the silence punctuated by sirens in the park that morning.

Our hearts were lifted when we reached the north end of the Reservoir. We could see the New York City skyline: The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building reflecting sunshine in the light blue sky. We felt relieved, but sad too. White smoke drifted toward the southwest just above the buildings. At about this time we began to hear the first of the F16's overhead. First we saw them flying singly east to west over Central Park, then in pairs flying north to south. We began to encounter people in groups of 10-15 dressed in business attire walking north through the park. They had left mid-town and were headed home on foot. More than the words that passed between us, looking directly into their eyes made us all feel somewhat better. I also understood why so many people wanted to walk in the park under the trees providing shade.

We continued south toward Belvedere Castle. We were going to keep to as normal a routine as possible, which meant looking for hawks in migration from Belvedere Castle. Tazmeen Rajwani, walking her bike, carried the conversation. Most of us needed time alone in our minds to think about things. The sound of her voice, and the conversations that ensued kept us going.

Ultimately we would arrive at the Castle only to be turned away. We decided to set up shop on the north side of Turtle Pond with the vast expanse of the Great Lawn in front of us. Above us, a peregrine was circling, and a red-tail too. Migrating raptors joined them: first a kestrel cutting just above the trees from east to west, exiting the park near the El Dorado, then a high Red-tailed Hawk, followed by three sharp-shins at intervals. The cloudless sky made the migrants very difficult to see. A few people wondered what we were doing looking at the sky. We found them an osprey and a kestrel buzzing a Red-tailed Hawk.

At one point we spotted what looked to be a commercial airliner flying almost out of sight. I was very worried at that point. There were rumors that at least four more airliners were in the air at that time and still circling the northeast. Two of the F16's made a beeline toward the larger jet and were joined by two others headed in the same direction flying at a much lower altitude. The

planes turned north up the east side. I saw one of the F16's go below the larger jet and a second drop back and above. We were frightened. Finally, it seemed as though the F16 below the larger plane had "docked" in some way and must have been refueling. Other raptors would pass over us, but counting raptors began to lose meaning. I needed to go home too just to reassure myself that everything was okay there.

Each of us will always remember where we were on September 11, 2001. I will forever feel sad about that day, but remember the people I was with and how we tried to deal with the emptiness together. Where we go from here is up to us.

On the night of September 13th, I awoke in the dark. My throat was burning. The smoke from the WTC had finally drifted north on southwest winds to the Bronx, and the heavy night air had pushed it low to the ground. The smell was acrid, like burning plastic or rubber tires. I turned on the news to hear the latest developments. One of the stations had a military man singing "Amazing Grace." I went outside into the cool night air to find out exactly what it was like. I could hear the chips of migrating birds passing overhead, like small shooting stars. I just stood there and kept wondering: What gives life meaning?

Robert DeCandido, PhD

New York City