



Hawk Mountain:

three journeys

October 6, 2020

Where are we headed? In the Northeast, this is the time of year for avian migration. We love the fanfare of color that the fall brings to the trees, but we also love the fleeting glimpses of rarer birds passing overhead. Eastern Pennsylvania is the home of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, which is part of the Blue Ridge Mountains within the Appalachian Mountain Chain, and is aptly named for the excellent views it provides of

migrating birds of prey. For those willing to climb the trails to the various lookouts, the reward can be the sighting of a bald eagle, kestrel, osprey, or any number of other raptors.

On Hawk Mountain, hikers begin at the Visitor Center, the main building, home to classrooms, an amphitheater and a shop—a wealth of information. With map in hand, you can choose where you want to go and know how you will get there. There are five different trails with blazes of green, orange, red, yellow and blue. Green is accessible; it has no stairs. Blue is challenging; at least once it goes straight up a stack of boulders. The rest are in between. Each trail is marked, mapped, and routinely cared for. There are pictures of the summit, and hikers know how to get there.

When raptors migrate, they have a destination, but their journey is not entirely predictable. They rely on rising currents of warm air, thermals, to provide them with opportunities to glide. These thermals don't create a straight line to their destination—the thermals might even take the raptors the wrong direction at times—but over the long journey, there are enough thermals in the right places that the raptors reach the warmer destinations they seek.

In the fall and spring, researchers for Hawk Mountain climb the trails every day to count the passing birds. That's the job. Count birds migrating. It is a process that needs to be followed to gain understanding. The counting has no end, no destination. Hike. Observe. Count. Repeat.

Right now, many of us are nervous. We are individuals on our own journeys, while we are also neighbors, colleagues, teammates, citizens, and members of other groups, also on differing journeys. To where? And what if we feel like we don't have a map, or we don't have thermals? How should we go forward?

The researchers' journeys offer answers. The value is in the observation and connection. Each time there is something more to experience and understand. For them, it is raptors to count. For us it may be a scent. A sound. A view. Nature inevitably makes small changes. No matter how many times the path is travelled, there will always be something new. New sounds. New sensations. Sound of screeches high above. Sweet scents of blossoms. And this time of year, little bursts of color descending all around.

This shower of color can also help us find our way. Color reminds us that we need to be observant in order to see clearly. Whether it is a cornucopia of fall reds, yellows, and oranges, the winter gray of bare branches, or the green buds in the spring, there is always something new to observe, some new experience that connects you to yourself, and to the larger world around you.

Observe and connect. Be attentive and attuned. Reach out and join in.

There is security in simply moving forward. It is okay to be on a journey, even if you don't know what the end looks like. That makes the journey an act of hope, and that is a powerful force.

Don't give up. Keep going.