

Don't Lose Your Head in the New Year

By Sherry E Engler

While many of my human friends declare that, with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, they may just lose their heads; I must tell you sadly that one of my bird friends actually did. And while I realize this is an example of the Darwinian evolutionary phrase, "survival of the fittest" or perhaps a case of "out with the old, in with the new," I cannot be more grateful that I am a human and not a Mourning Dove, especially a Mourning Dove living in close proximity to our driveway.

One of the true splendors of living in Rim Country, nestled between the Mogollon Rim and the Matatzal Mountain Range, is the beauty of wildlife, large and small. And sometimes, it is the survival of the fittest in the wildlife structure which claims our interest and total attention, leaving its mark forever in our minds and memories. Thus, my mind will be forever engraved with images of the struggle between an Arizona Mourning Dove and a Red-Tailed Hawk. For years, Mourning Doves have graced our trees, electric lines and fences with their beautiful presence. We have heard them softly coo to one another, lined together in a perched community, perhaps even conveying peaceful thoughts to one another (historically, the Mourning Dove represents peace in many cultures). And, to some, our Mourning Doves may appear "usual" or "ordinary;" to us, our Mourning Doves are very SPECIAL creatures. We have the prettiest, healthiest, fattest Mourning Doves in the entire neighborhood, community, county, state, etc. and we totally delight in the joyous moments we have observed these beautiful serene birds. (Just to note: one reason our Mourning Doves are rather plump is that they have access to our horses' grain and they truly are more the size of a small chicken than a dove which brings me to my next point.

If you have lived in Rim Country very long, you are probably familiar with the term "chicken hawk" aka the Red-Tailed Hawk. It is probably also a fact that if you are a Mourning Dove the size of a small chicken, you may gain the attention and perhaps even fall prey to a *Buteo Jamaicensis Fuertesi*, otherwise known as the Southwestern Red-Tailed Hawk or chicken hawk. Hence, begins my tale of the act which will forever make me happy I am human:

There the poor gray dove lay, in the middle of the driveway, dead and missing its head. What? What happened to this poor peaceful feathered friend? Surely, this was not human caused because dove hunting season was over weeks ago. Who or what could have done this dastardly deed? Who or what would ever want to hurt such a symbol of grace?

Then I saw the culprit. A small, very young Red-Tailed Hawk, barely bigger in size than the dove. (Even though this hawk may eventually weigh between two to four pounds in adulthood, at present, it is my estimation this juvenile probably weighs six and a half ounces. You may be pondering how I came to that conclusion. Thus, if the average dove weighs four to six ounces and our dove are a little on the heavy side, I am concluding this dove was probably a six ounce and therefore, the hawk, being slightly bigger, a six and a half ounce.)

Recounting my ghastly discovery, the young hawk swooped down to his prey in a protective manner as if to say, "This is my dinner, not yours!" He faced me with his glaring yellow eyes, indicative of his youth. (The irises of the Red Tailed Hawk turn reddish brown in maturity.)

Slowly, plucking feathers from the lifeless form, he seemed tolerant of my presence, which is one reason hawks reside in close proximity to humans. Humans do not seem to bother them. As I stepped yet closer, the hawk became unwilling to share his feast; he tried unsuccessfully to lift

the dove and fly off with it. He tugged and tugged and tugged. He grabbed relentlessly at the bird while trying to take flight. Even in failure of flight, the hawk displayed courage beyond description. Perhaps, this was what won my admiration of the Red-Tailed Hawk. His courage and persistent effort in this tenuous moment was gallant chivalry; for I realized a brave soul existed in this very young bird, perhaps only four months old because this is the age young hawks become independent beings, independent of their parents. Suddenly, I thought, "Oh my! I have lost my head! I am cheering for the hawk instead of the dove!"

The Red-Tailed Hawk interestingly is considered a raptor because it is a carnivore or bird of prey which eats meat instead of seeds like the Mourning Dove. In Europe, hawks are even called "buzzards." The Red-Tailed Hawk is named because of the reddish cinnamon color of its tail feathers. This bird has a very strong hooked beak for dismembering its prey and very sturdy talons for hooking into small rodents, birds or snakes. Interestingly, the hawk has been incorporated into the sport of falconry in Asia and Egypt since 3000 BC. Falconry is the sport in which humans train the hawk to hunt game; once the hawk claims the game, the human confiscates the game by trading the hawk a different treat. (Wow! Sounds interesting!) Apparently, hawks are very tame and trainable when raised in a responsive environment. Red-Tailed Hawks are legally protected federally by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and are not to be hunted, harmed or destroyed. There are some states which have additional laws and stiff regulations to preserve this magnificent bird of prey.

In my imagination, I surmise the fate of my Mourning Dove. The Mourning Dove is circling in the crisp, morning air, unsuspecting of the danger lurking in the juniper tree. Suddenly, the small hawk takes to flight. Because the dove can only fly 55 mph, the hawk overtakes the prey by diving 120 mph. Colliding in midair, the hawk gains a meal by taking the dove to the ground. Because of the graphic images in my head about what occurs next, I will simply state, "And so goes the way of life."

A new year and a new day and once again, the beautiful Mourning Doves are lined in a perched row; however, the cooing I once interpreted as peacefulness, now sounds of sorrow as there is one extra space where the chicken sized Mourning Dove used to partake in this ritual with its family before it lost its head and met its demise. And at the end of the drive is still the prevalent danger of the magnificent and characteristically brave Red-Tailed Hawk, otherwise known as a chicken hawk.

So, as we celebrate a New Year, so too must we celebrate newness in life, newness of New Year ambitions, the dawning of 2017, newness of dreams and chores to be accomplished. And even though sometimes difficult, we must embrace the survival of the fittest concept in the wildlife world around us. Hopefully, we won't lose our heads. Happy, Happy New Year! May God richly bless you and yours.