

A New York City parable: Pale Male, the red-tailed hawk

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In *Aesop's Fables* and other parables, animal behavior serves as an instructive paradigm for human and social relations. The sly fox dies of thirst trying to reach the grapes, the overconfident hare loses out to the persistent tortoise, the shackled lion humbles himself to let the mouse gnaw through his ropes.

What lesson might be drawn from the story of Pale Male, the 10-year-old red-tailed hawk whose nest was removed last week from the façade of one of New York's most fashionable Fifth Avenue addresses, touching off angry protests?

To the many hundreds of dedicated bird-lovers who come every year—not just from the local area, but from across the country and even around the world—to watch the hawk through their cameras and high-powered binoculars, Pale Male epitomizes the indomitable spirit of nature pitted against the urban environment.

They read human virtues into behavior that is for the most part instinctual—praising his unique personality, and exceptional parenting skills. One of Pale Male's self-appointed guardians, Charles Kennedy, went as far as to say, "He is a good dad. He just is. He is the one we always wanted."

The bird's fans are undoubtedly moved by a wild animal's mating and fledgling-raising rituals in the heart of the city, and they have made him famous. There is a best-selling novel about him, *Red Tails in Love*, by Marie Winn, under consideration to be made into a film by director Nora Ephron. Public television produced an award-winning documentary about him narrated by Joanne Woodward and based on Winn's book. He even has own web site.

Whether they admit it or not, however, the subtext of Pale Male's fame has as much to do with his audacious choice of an address as it does with his wildlife status. Apartments at 927 Fifth Avenue sell for as much as \$18

million, and the building is home to some of New York's richest and most famous. Among the select few residing there are actress Mary Tyler Moore (one of the hawk's most ardent defenders), CNN newscaster Paula Zahn (who had a protester arrested for allegedly harassing her), and former Enron director Robert A. Belfer.

The bird lives there for free along with his mates and fledglings.

Or rather, lived, until the president of the co-op board and wealthy real estate developer Richard Cohen unilaterally ordered the nest removed last week. Residents had complained that the 8-by-3-foot nest overlooking the front entrance was too large, and that the hawks were swooping down on pigeons and rats, gobbling them up and hurling the remains on the sidewalk.

The irony seems lost upon most of these residents that what they find offensive in the hawks' behavior bears a striking resemblance to their own social role. What about *their* oversized and well-feathered nests, which take up entire floors of the 5th Avenue building? As for unseemly predatory practices, the hawk doesn't hold a candle to the likes of an Enron director or his fellow co-op owner Bruce Wasserstein, the Wall Street mergers-and-acquisitions mogul.

The hawks, at least, do their hunting to survive, whereas these multimillionaires carry out their socially destructive activities for the sole purpose of amassing ever-greater mountains of wealth.

Red-tailed hawks are rare enough to have been protected by a treaty signed in 1918 between several nations, including the US, Canada and Russia. A decade ago, an earlier attempt to evict the birds was blocked when their defenders invoked this international agreement.

Like the corporations that have been allowed to ride roughshod over environmental protection regulations in pursuit of profit, the multimillionaire co-op owners easily secured a “reinterpretation” of the treaty from the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. The agency ruled that the nest could be removed as long as it contained no eggs or chicks, giving the co-op board the green light to finally get rid of what it saw as a long-standing nuisance.

Now protesters dressed as birds and waving placards saying “Honk 4 Hawks” have mounted a vigil across the street from the elegant building. In an attempt to broker a resolution to the conflict, a meeting was organized between government officials representing another multimillionaire, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, environmental groups such as the New York City Audubon Society, and members of the co-op board.

The birders are insisting that the nest be restored to its original spot, 12 stories above the canopied entrance. In an effort to appease them, the building management is offering to spend \$100,000 to build a platform and relocate the nest on the roof.

There is something obscene in all of this brouhaha. It contrasts starkly with the prevailing social indifference toward 36,000 people sleeping in New York City homeless shelters every night—while thousands of others make their own rather pathetic nests of cardboard boxes on the sidewalks until they are roused by the police. No treaty protects them, and there are no protests when they are thrown out of their homes for not being able to pay the rent.

Not just individuals, but whole neighborhoods can be summarily evicted to build multimillion-dollar sports complexes and other high-profit developments. In one instance among many, a new arena for the Nets of the National Basketball Association, proposed in a lower-income Brooklyn neighborhood by developer Bruce Ratner, will most likely be built despite the protest of residents, who face the destruction of their homes.

So while the birders may see in Pale Male a model parent or a defiant force of nature, the controversy over his eviction tells another story. It is one in which a powerful and rapacious elite preys mercilessly on the poor and defenseless, indifferently casting their remains away when they’ve extracted all they could. That is the true parable of Pale Male and New York City, the

capital of capital.



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