

THE GRACE OF WILDNESS

The moment we hoist packs, the rain begins. It is four days before fall equinox; this is no spring mist. A horizontal wind slaps wet against us, and the cold stings our faces. Other problems soon become apparent: crippling blisters, forgotten gear, lethargy. It's a long walk, much of it in loose sand. The group's mood is sullen as the sky. Concerned about water, I try to hurry the students along, circling back with words of encouragement and offerings of dried fruit. They tolerate me—that's all.

Then comes our first grace: at midday the clouds blow off, like the unfurling of a curtain. We have descended deep within the canyon of burnished Wingate sandstone. The students get their first look at the lovely juxtaposition of redrock and Utah blue sky. The air remains sweatshirt-cool, even though the sun is out. Several days of rain provide a damp chill to the air. Fast hikers get stiff muscles waiting for stragglers, while slow ones get aggravated when everyone heads out just as they finally limp up.

It's now we receive the second grace of the day.

I round a bend to see one of the students running back toward

me: "Tom! You've got to come here, quick!" She signals me forward and points at the wet clay in the wash bottom. Lying there, shivering on the cold mud, is a robin-sized slate-gray bird with muscular black feet and a broad mouth. In all my years as a naturalist, I've never had an encounter like this—a bird on the ground, for the taking. Recalling handling techniques from banding birds two decades earlier, I carefully pick up the bird, nestle its back against my warm palm, and brace its head between my first two fingers. Its eyes glisten with vulnerability and attention, but it remains motionless in my hand.

Though I have studied birds for over twenty years, I am disoriented—who is this? The visceral connection between the bird's fluttering heartbeat and the nerve-tips in my fingers focuses me on this animal as an individual being, not a member of a species. This bird man or woman, stunned by the cold, stares back at me. I feel power returning to its long wings. I carefully curl back my fingers and level my hand. The gray bird sits still for a few seconds, then leaps from my hand and flaps its long wings—once, twice, three times.

The instant it's in flight I recognize it as one of my favorite canyon

birds, a White-throated Swift. It circles higher and higher above us. Then, from a nearby cliff, a second swift surges toward the first; they circle together, becoming smaller and smaller, and disappear against the red cliff. The individual being has disappeared completely back into the anonymity of the species. We humans look into each other's eyes.

"What was it?"

"Why was it lying on the ground?"

"How did you know what to do?"

I answer as best I can. *It's a White-throated Swift. I don't have any idea how it ended up on the ground, but once there, it was stuck—swifts are among the most aerial of all birds; they can only take off by launching from a ledge. How did I know what to do? I just followed my instincts, remembering the proper way to hold a bird, and watching its eyes very, very closely.*

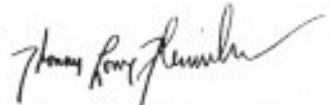
We sling our heavy packs back on and resume our gradual movement down the canyon, toward water. But our eyes keep scanning the cliffs for the catapulting flight of swifts. The sky trembles with a new possibility. My fingertips still carry the lingering heartbeat of fear, and the joy of re-found freedom.

We humans cannot leap into dazzling flight. But we can access this tingling sensation—call it freedom, call it wildness—each time we enter these astonishing stone canyons. We feel it in the vibrating shade below numberless cottonwoods, or within the glow of shimmering evening light on polished sandstone walls. We hear it in the sound of water plashing over a rock ledge, and in the sudden torrent of a Canyon Wren's rippling song. And yes, we see it in the swooping flight of a swift. The landscapes that protect these simple, profound splendors are

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found nowhere else in the world—which is why travelers converge here from every corner of the globe.

Are we really so eager to trade these startling silences and unadulterated beauties—these rare places that harbor freedom—for the same dismal grind and clang, the same acrid smoke, the same standardized monotony of industry's footprint? Why would we trade the rare elation of real freedom for the mundane ordinariness of plundering the world?



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