

Fine Feathered Foe

By Dennis Payton Knight

The challenge is an essay on Fine Feathered Friends, and indeed a duck may be somebody's mother. But being the cynic I am, I am more inclined to write about those who might be our fine feathered foes.

I cannot count as foe the waterfowl, grouse and pheasants who populate our waterways and prairies, although they must see us as enemies, particularly those among us who travel in teams with shotguns and golden retrievers. But from our perspective, such fowl do not have the temperament to be the foul and offensive foes of humans. They are but fine feathered friends who sometimes join us for dinner, whether they like it or not. Geese are another story, and more on that later.

In my search for flocks of fine feathered foes, I considered the Red-tailed Hawk. One of them made headlines some years ago when he got after some picnicking humans in Connecticut. They had approached too close to his tree and nest, and he attacked them beak and claw until they ran for cover. But you really cannot call the Red-tailed hawk a foe, because that skirmish was entirely human error. They should not have come without an invitation.

The Snowy Owl was a candidate, breeding and raising his family in the Arctic Circle. Like the hawk, it also raises holy hell when humans approach its home on the frozen tundra, and it has the size and ferocity to do it. You might remember the Snowy Owl from the movie as a fine feathered friend of Harry Potter, but that was just acting. The Snowy Owl may actually qualify as foe; however, this wizard will not be going north to find out.

The Lammergeier is a German vulture that swoops up bones left behind from the post-mortem feast, dropping them from on high to fracture and get at the soft marrow inside. Since they aim the bones at rocks and not humans, it would be unfair to call the Lammergeier our foe. But if a flying femur does happen to take out a human, well, that's the way the bone crumbles, and accidents do make good pickings.

I then considered the Barred Owl which feeds on small prey like rabbits and rodents. Its range once was limited to forests in the Southern United States, but it has expanded into territories all the way to British Columbia. It is not a deliberate foe to humans, it just finds it hard to distinguish between small animals foraging about in the underbrush and furry human heads bobbing through the woods, and so hard hats are now encouraged. Coonskin caps are discouraged.

After all this research I have identified one true foe in feathers. By day it flocks and honks through our airspace with no obvious purpose. It lands to taunt us and foul our links and gardens, and it cackles all night from a nearby pond. It is our Fine Feathered Foe, the infernal Canada Goose.