



The View From Heifer Hill—August 2023

Fledging

THE RED maple outside my bedroom window is always busy with birds. On a recent morning, I noticed the leaves along the branch at eye level were extra fluttery. When they fluttered the right way, I saw a nest stuffed to overflowing with baby robins. In a moment, one tumbled, flapped, and managed to secure a perch on a low branch. And so, I spent the day on my bed to celebrate and document this momentous day. Each time a parent arrived with food, the nest would erupt with begging calls and waving maws. Each time that happened, the launched fledgling chirped from below. After every few deliveries to the upstairs brood, a parent would deliver a meal downstairs.

The young robins spent much of their waking time preening, an act that zips their feathers into a waterproof suit and coats them with a water repellent oil. That afternoon, a thundercloud lowered over the maple tree and released a shower. The mother arrived and settled herself over two of chicks. The third tucked her head into the maternal breast. I could see the rain beading and rolling off their feathers.

I worried about the nestlings. Noisy chicks in a nest, with parents coming and going, are magnets for predators. Two years ago, I saw a hawk raiding a robin's nest in the same tree. But are the youngsters safer when they fledge? It's true that they have a chance to evade some predators once they can flutter, but sustained, coordinated flight takes practice, and fledglings must announce their location if they want to be fed.

In late afternoon, the nestlings began testing their wings in earnest. One more little robin hurtled from the nest. Can you imagine what it takes to make such a leap the first time?

The next day I heard the robins and blue jays give a few warning calls. The calls lacked urgency, but I headed outside. By the time I got to the birds, the calls had reached the level of red alert and I knew a hawk was nearby. Sure enough, when I joined the hullabaloo, a hawk took off, the robin parents in pursuit. Long after the chase had been completed, the adult robins kept clucking in distress.



The next day, two stout nestlings shared the roomy nest. I watched the parents but no longer heard the begging chirps of the other two nearby. Was it possible that the hawk or other predators had already made tasty meals of them? I went outside to watch and wait and see if I could locate them. The parents tut-tutted nervously and one swooped down to land near me. As I moved away, one of the fledglings took to the air from a branch a foot away. She headed toward the house, rising fast but not fast enough. She made a sliding attempt to land on the edge of the roof, took wing again and veered around the front of the house, nervous parents flying after her.

Robins are a cosmopolitan species and have adapted well to living among humans. Life is not without danger and difficulty. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, only 40% of robins' nesting attempts produce fledglings. About 25% of fledglings survive until November. From that point, their chance of surviving for another year is the same as that of an adult, 50%.

It's when we look at baby robins in the aggregate that the craft of evolution becomes apparent. The timing of events is choreographed by nature—nesting, fledging, migration—such that the river of robins flows from one generation to the next.

While considering baby robins in the aggregate is reassuring, watching baby robins as individuals is much more interesting, if nerve-wracking. Two days after the first young robin fledged, the last two decided they've had enough of nestling life. Now the parents are tracking all four fledglings, keeping them fed, teaching them to eat, ever vigilant. These four have some advantages; a flock of blue jays patrols my yard. While robins' eggs might make a meal for a jay, once the young have fledged, the jays are allies. The young tune in to the blue jay scanner and freeze in place when they hear that there is a hawk or fox nearby. My yard is also safer for fledglings because their number one predator is absent—the house cat. If they're very lucky, they will spend next summer feeding and fretting over their own brood of fledglings.