

SIGHTINGS

Extraordinary Encounters with Ordinary Birds



SAM KEEN

AUTHOR OF *Fire in the Belly*



Illustrations by MARY WOODIN



SIGHTINGS

Extraordinary Encounters with Ordinary Birds

SAM KEEN

Illustrations by MARY WOODIN



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

TEXT COPYRIGHT © 2007 BY SAM KEEN.

ILLUSTRATIONS COPYRIGHT © 2007 BY MARY WOODIN.

“WHITE HERON” BY JOHN CIARDI, REPRINTED BY PERMISSION FROM
JOHN L. CIARDI, TRUSTEE, CIARDI FAMILY TRUST.

“DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT” BY DYLAN THOMAS,
FROM *THE POEMS OF DYLAN THOMAS*, COPYRIGHT © 1952 BY DYLAN THOMAS.
REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF DENT IN THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH
AND BY PERMISSION OF NEW DIRECTIONS PUBLISHING CORP. IN THE REST
OF THE WORLD.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED
IN ANY FORM WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM THE PUBLISHER.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA AVAILABLE.

ISBN-10: 0-8118-5976-2

ISBN-13: 978-0-8118-5976-9

MANUFACTURED IN CHINA.

DESIGNED BY SUSANNE WEIHL | FOLIO2

DISTRIBUTED IN CANADA BY RAINCOAST BOOKS

9050 SHAUGHNESSY STREET

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA V6P 6E5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHRONICLE BOOKS LLC

680 SECOND STREET

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94107

WWW.CHRONICLEBOOKS.COM

DEDICATION



FOR PATRICIA DE JONG

*Arise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For,
lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The
flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing
of birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is
heard in our land.*

—SONG OF SOLOMON 2:10–12



CONTENTS



<i>White Heron</i> by John Ciardi	9
INTRODUCTION	11
THE INDIGO BUNTING <i>first sighting</i>	19
THE EVERLASTING CARDINAL <i>in love abiding</i>	29
SPARROWS, SAPSUCKERS, AND RATTLESNAKES <i>the commonwealth of sentient beings</i>	37
THE WOOD THRUSH <i>an enchanting echo</i>	43
THE MO(U)RNING DOVE <i>ambiguity and soul</i>	49
TURKEY VULTURES <i>dark angels</i>	57
THE DAWN CHORUS <i>sacred soundscapes</i>	65
BIRD BRAINS <i>the cosmic mindscape</i>	75
WILD TURKEYS <i>dwelling among familiars</i>	85
THE LORD GOD BIRD <i>the g— of second chances</i>	95
SIGHTINGS <i>the passions of birders</i>	109



White Heron

*What lifts the heron leaning on the air
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,
a shaped thought at the sky—then gone. O rare!
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please.*

*But praise. By any name or none. But praise
the white original burst that lights
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,
I sit by pond scums till the air recites
Its heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.*

—JOHN CIARDI



INTRODUCTION



*It is private life that holds
out the mirror to infinity.*

—E. M. FORSTER

ONCE UPON AN IMPROBABLE TIME, in an unlikely city not given to adoration, an unexpected epiphany occurred. Shortly before Christmas, the only poor but contented residents of a Fifth Avenue cooperative were unceremoniously evicted from their home. The co-op board ordered its minions to destroy the nest of a pair of Red-tailed Hawks that had occupied a small ledge-sited penthouse for more than a decade. The hawks' eating and hygiene habits were simply unacceptable to the rich and famous. Too many pigeon feathers and inedible portions of mouse were falling to the sidewalks of New York.

Overnight, the cult of Pale Male and Lola came into being. Hundreds of citizens who were inured to crime and

grime flocked into Central Park with binoculars and telescopes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the blessed birds. The scene was reminiscent of the appearances of the Virgin Mary on remote Greek islands, which attract hordes of the faithful. Web sites sprang up, chronicling every move of the couple as they terrorized pigeons and devoured mice and rats. The devout kept watch night and day and reported every return, every gesture of affection, every twig carried in hope to the site of the destroyed nest.

A widespread protest of the sacrilege went up from the supposedly secular core of the Big Apple. Suddenly, the honor and soul of the city were at stake. Could New York allow such injustice to go unopposed? Could the modest poor be displaced by the heartless rich? Could the last remnants of the creatures of the wild be banished from the city? The answer came loud and clear: no! The arrogant board failed to understand that it had an obligation to be guardian of the public, communal, and civic space, and that Pale Male and his family belonged to all the people. Avian activists stood out in the cold with pickets until the embattled apartment dwellers were forced to rescind their decision and restore the ledge to the homeless hawks.

With millions of eyes watching their every move, Pale Male and Lola rebuilt their nest and prepared to start over again. When nesting time arrived, anxious devotees kept watch to see if Lola would lay eggs and produce fledglings. The first eggs did not hatch. Many feared that post-traumatic