

Fly Out

by Carol Cox

The blackness of the winter night is broken only by a few stars twinkling overhead and the muted brilliance of Venus shining through a thin veil of clouds in the east. At first it is almost imperceptible, as if you are imagining it, but gradually the dark sky begins to lighten ever so slightly behind the distant mountains. As the faint glow spreads, the marsh becomes visible. Darkened outlines of cranes walk slowly on stilted legs, geese float in huddled groups while ducks swim by in a line astern. The cold is intense, as only a winter dawn in the desert high plains can be, but the air is calm and there is a sense of anticipation. The marshes of the Bosque contain tens of thousands of sandhill cranes and snow geese all awaiting the light and warmth of the sun to begin moving into the fields to feed.

The soft golden light of the still invisible sun turns to shades of pink and magenta, washing the edges of the clouds in a rosy hue. A brilliant palette of shades mixed with the soft blue of the emerging sky, reflected in a mirror of calm water. The silence is broken only by the cackle of nearby sandhill cranes mixed with the soft honking of snow geese and the mad quacking of ducks.

In the distance there is a sound like a far off train, waves crashing on a distant shore or a wind where none exists. Outlined against the crimson sky, the shapes of thousands of geese appear. At first they are only far off specks swirling and circling, their cries growing steadily louder. They come closer and closer until the sound is overwhelming. Churning throngs so thick they almost block out the light. Thousands of birds approach and fly directly overhead, so close you can hear the whistle of wings and feel their wind. You become part of the masses above, as if you flying with them can reach out and touch them. Part of the

jumbled horde of churning white geese, like being caught in a strange noisy blizzard. Wave

after wave they keep coming. More birds than you have ever seen before. More birds than you can comprehend exist in one place. Layers and layers of geese flying in all directions. The highest characteristic V's and lines. Lower down just the chaos of a myriad of swirling birds. Individual cries are lost in the deafening wall of sound as each family group tries to keep in contact in the midst of the turmoil. A wonderful sound, hard to describe. Natural and yet unnatural. The winds of a hurricane must sound like this.

When you can finally take your eyes off of the spectacle above you notice that the marsh in front is filling with geese. Floating masses of white on a pink and blue sea. More land, never on the edge of the massive flotillas, always in the middle. Feet down, wings flailing as they descend. Eventually it seems as if not one more could possibly fit, but they continue to land, gradually emptying the sky. Others fly in the distance, but for the moment relative quiet prevails nearly, like the eerie silence in the eye of the storm. Gentle chatter replaces riotous honking. The wonders of the last few minutes seem almost unreal.

The sun finally appears over the edge of the mountains, at first just a brilliant point of light, then with amazing speed rising to its full golden glory. The cranes have watched all of this frantic activity rather stoically. As if they have seen it all before and refused to get caught up in such frivolous waste of energy. All around you the geese rest, preen, and bathe. A few test their wings, preparing for their inevitable departure. This cannot be the end of the show. The previous performance was just an overture to a much grander symphony. All of these birds

still must eventually get to the fields to feed. Minutes pass. Anticipation builds. Still nothing happens. Then in an instant all of the geese are in the air. Acting as if of one mind, they magically levitate. The water that only seconds ago was filled with their white bodies boils as thousands lift as one. They create their own wind, which washes over you. You can actually smell them. The chaos returns and the earlier spectacle repeats itself. Deafening sound, swirling masses overhead, another enchanting moment when you are caught up in the flight. High above, almost beyond the limit of your vision, soars the cause of their precipitous departure. In the distance, a bald eagle approaches from the west.

After circling for a few minutes most of the birds return to the water and the beautiful pageant repeats itself several more times. Geese on water, frantic exodus, wonderful clamorous sound, chaotic flight overhead and eagle in the distance. An incredible ballet of predator and prey that seems to be choreographed for your entertainment. The sun finally begins to warm the air and you can remove cap and mittens. The geese feel it too. They take off once more, but with a decreased sense of urgency this time. Large flocks rise and circle, but do not land. They fly over repeatedly, organizing for their departure. At first they swirl in large disorganized flocks, looking like large schools of fish in a sky blue ocean, turning one way and ten another, flying as one. What type of communication tells them when to turn and how to avoid flying into each other? As they turn into the sun the entire flock sparkles a brilliant white. They go higher and higher organizing into flight formations. In the distance there is line upon line, as far as the eye can see. In binoculars the skeins of geese disappear into the horizon. Thousands and thousands until only a few remain in the marsh. The performance

appears to be over, but there is a final more dignified act to follow.

Now that the skies are clear, the sandhill cranes feel it is safe to finally leave. None of this chaotic helter skelter for them. If the geese are the swift darting acrobats of the air show, the cranes are the Flying Fortresses. They lift majestically in flocks of ten to thirty and immediately organize into V shaped formations. With their huge wings, long thin outstretched necks and legs straight behind, they look like ancient pterodactyls. Large numbers appear from all over the marsh and fly overhead, all moving north to the fields. You feel like a British coast watcher during World War Two watching the flights of bombers form up and head off to war. Flight after flight passes low overhead, the drone of engines replaced by the eerie croaking of nature's most ancient birds. Cranes that have migrated along these same corridors for tens of thousands of years.

The marsh is quiet now, the ducks and other waterfowl are left to feed in peace. Like a traveling circus the geese and cranes have moved on, but this troupe gives two performances a day. At dusk they all return to the marsh to rest and prepare for tomorrow mornings exhibition. Then, one early spring day, something is different. The flights are larger and more organized. They take off into the distance and do not return, beginning their migration north to summer breeding grounds. The snow geese all the way to the Arctic Circle, cranes to Wyoming or Idaho. They are replaced by new cast members, shorebirds, egrets, pelicans and neotropical migrants. Summer is a quiet time in the Bosque, the cries of geese and cranes replaces by the drone of unimaginable numbers of mosquitoes; but as fall approaches and the days become cool flights of geese and cranes reappear in the north as the seasonal cycle repeats itself. It's show time.