

## VESPER FLIGHTS

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One of the most enjoyable books of the many I have read this year has been “Vesper Flights” by poet and naturalist Helen Macdonald. A collection of essays about the intersection of the natural and human worlds, it is an exquisite book that I didn’t want to end. The title essay is about the swift, the bird whose characteristics are so extraordinary that they are hard to believe, and whose behavior may have much to teach us.

I’ve only seen a few swifts, and they were so high and moving so fast that I can’t really say that I know anything about them, which, it turns out, is a characteristic of this amazing bird. They are always in the air and they are always on the move. Once they are born and fledged they seldom touch the ground or rest except to raise their brood. They feed on insects on the move. They are actually able to sleep while they fly. Each year they migrate thousands of miles. They even mate as they fly!

One of their most fascinating behaviors occurs in the early evening when they gather in packs and begin what has come to be known as their ‘vesper flights,’ from the Latin word for ‘evening,’ ‘vesperas.’ Macdonald writes: “all at once, as if summoned by a call or a bell, they rise higher and higher until they disappear from view.” Researchers have discovered that the swift’s vesper flights take them to heights of 8,000 feet from which they descend to feed. They repeat the pattern in the dawn hours. At the height of their flight they enter a flow of wind that is unaffected by the landscape below. There they can see clouds of oncoming frontal systems. They can see star patterns and calibrate their compasses. At the height of their vesper flight they are orienting themselves. And they don’t do it alone. “To orient themselves correctly, to make right decisions, they need to pay attention not only to the cues of the world around them, but also to each other.

As I read this description of the characteristics and behavior of the swifts, I found myself reflecting on the year we have come through, and on the opportunities the new year affords. Like the vesper flights of the swifts, perhaps we need to gather together and rise high enough together to orient ourselves to our world, so that we can navigate the future.

Macdonald observes: “Swifts aren’t always cresting the atmospheric boundary layer at dizzying heights; most of the time they are living below it in thick and complicating air. That’s where they feed and mate and bathe and drink and are. But to find out about the important things that will affect their lives, they must go higher to survey the wider scene, and there communicate with others about the large forces impinging on their realm.” Indeed!

With the advent of vaccines for Covid-19, we are beginning to see the hope for easing and ending of this relentless pandemic. That is because there are those who have been able to rise above the thick and complicating air of daily risk and necessary sacrifice to learn what is required to make right decisions for the benefit of all. The past year has been disorienting, but if we flock together and rise above it, we will be able to see what we need to reorient ourselves and endure. From this Vesper Flight can come a new calibration of our collective compass that will give direction for our way ahead.

Amen! I wish you a Blessed New Year! Stay safe and healthy!