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WILDLIFE IN THE PLACE OF DEATH

A new look at the old graveyard.

Last Spring, as my wife and I were taking a Sunday drive through the dairy-lined back roads of Cortland County in Central New York, we stopped at a small, old graveyard near an all-but-defunct village. (To me, there's always been something irresistible about the titled headstones, leaning wrought-iron gates, and overgrown grass and wildflowers of old cemeteries: Seems they compel me in life, as inevitably as they will compel me death!) As we walked among the 19th century slabs of slate, reading names and epitaphs of the long-gone locals, I noticed that the place literally echoed with the song of robins…and it occurred to me that I had had many encounters with wildlife in cemeteries.

There was that red fox that my father and I had seen emerging from the cemetery south of Piseco Lake in the Southern Adirondacks; and that Red Tail hawk that used to consistently perch as I whiled away my lunch hours in Rochester's Mt. Hope Cemetery; or that Flicker, chipping away at an old Oak tree in the Lake Ontario shore-side cemetery of near Pultneyville; or even those bats, darting about the trees in the French Huguenot cemetery in New Paltz, where I attended undergraduate school: I would strike a stick on the pavement, and the crack of it would stir them from their summer-night --- among the trees.

Armed with these examples, I headed for the local library to explore this cemetery/wildlife

connection further. I soon learned the relationship was a long and interesting one.

Wildlife and the earliest cemeteries

The cemeteries of western civilization prior to Christianity, were generally located at remote sites beyond city walls – partly out of reverence, partly out of superstition, and partly for fear of what ailed the recently deceased. When common members of communities died, all but the close mourners generally accompanied the deceased as far as the town's limits. From there, the body was taken to a burial ground and either burned or interred in an individual or mass grave. (This is, of course, the most generic type of burial: culture-to-culture variations range from Norse nautical burials to the use of limestone caves as ancestral tombs in Egypt.) Incidentally, the word "cemetery" is actually derived from the early Greek word "koimeterion" – which means "a sleeping place."

What do these details have to do with wildlife?

Because of their distance from town centers, and because they were visited only when ceremony dictated, these remote burial grounds were both symbolically – and quite literally -- integrated into the natural life-cycle. On one hand, mourners consoled themselves with the finality and symbolism of sending their dead back to the great, natural beyond; on the other, the remains placed in these secluded graves were often carried off and included in the diets of roaming predators and scavengers – a headache for today's paleontologists.

As population density increased – and, particularly, as organized religions sought to recognize and embrace their dead parishioners by interring them closer to their various places of worship (consider the churchyards and catacombs of European cathedrals) -- cemeteries were increasingly located within town walls. This pendulum swing toward a more civilized cemetery,

would have significant repercussions.

The urban cemetery space shortage

Moving cemeteries within city walls may have had symbolic advantages for organized religions, but as was the case for those "living" in metropolitan areas – space soon became an issue for the non-living as well. In fact, because of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and a lack of regulations, both European and American urban cemeteries were nothing less than ghastly. London's churchyard cemeteries in Stuart times (1600-1720), for example, were layered so deep with earth and dead bodies that they frequently reached heights above cemetery walls. One observer stated that churches dwarfed by the bone-filled mounds around them looked as though they were built in pits.

For an example from our side of the Atlantic, consider this more recent account of an American city's cemetery problems (from Stanley French's "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution," Death in America, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.)

"…the old graveyards became so crowded that they were frequently little more than stinking quagmires – chronically offensive and occasionally serious health hazards… In New York City, the problem was such that the Board of Health…recommended that 'intramural' interments be prohibited and suggested that the existing city cemeteries be converted into parks 'instead of remaining receptacles of putrefying matter and hot-beds of miasmata…' the problem was allowed to ride [however]…until a yellow fever epidemic carried off 16,000 in the city in 1822…in the vicinity of Trinity Church burying ground."

From time to time, these problems came to the forefront of public debate in both Europe and America; after a prolonged period, two types of reform resulted.

On one hand grew legislation and regulations dictating the depth and proper spacing of graves; from such ordinances came the cliché “six feet under.” Other laws, meanwhile, mandated the use of coffins (until then a luxury), quarantined plots for epidemic or plague victims, and established cemetery-barrier and distance requirements.

On the other hand grew a social thrust for the return of the remote or rural cemetery, a far-reaching movement that both echoed – and in some ways – assisted to its feet, the fledgling general conservation movement of the mid-19th Century.

The rise of the Garden Cemetery

For practical purposes, America’s “garden cemetery” movement really began as an experimental solution to Boston’s overcrowded cemeteries. In 1825, under the auspices of Dr. Jacob Bigelow (author of an investigation of Boston’s urban “intramural cemeteries) and the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, 72 wooded acres were purchased above the Charles River near Harvard for use as a cemetery.

Dedicated in September of 1831, and called “Mount Auburn,” this revolutionary new cemetery – with its gravel-colored avenues named for rare trees and its flowered footpaths – quickly became the rage of the Northeast. Weekend strolls and carriage rides through its hills and vales were popular pastimes for both the well-to-do and middle-class Bostonians; and, in general, discussion of the cemetery helped to usher into America a more optimistic, philosophical, and even romanticized attitude toward death. (Prior to this time, Americans’ perceptions of death were generally as grim and matter-of-fact as the bone-strewn graveyards they were accustomed to seeing.) As Mr. French put it in his aforementioned essay: *“In the new type of cemetery the plentitude and beauties of nature combined with art would convert the graveyard from a shunned place of horror into an enchanting place of succor.”*

Because of its stress on fresh air, wildlife, and open spaces (as much for the benefit of the living as for the glorification of the dead), the concept of Mount Auburn spread quickly to the nation's other urban centers. New York was among the states where the idea transplanted especially well.

With notorious incentives like the 1822 epidemic, New York City was a prime candidate for the application of garden cemetery theory. Thus, the year 1838 marked the opening of Greenwood Cemetery in the then rural district of Brooklyn. On a wooded hill overlooking Gowanus Bay, "the Greenwood" generated a share of publicity and visitation that rivaled that of its Bostonian counterpart.

Meanwhile, the city of Rochester was planning the nation's first municipally-sponsored rural cemetery. Set aside in 1836, the swelling wood acres of Mount Hope Cemetery (near today's University of Rochester) soon placed Rochester among the nation's first-rate, garden cemetery cities. (Other notable period emulations of Boston's Mount Auburn sprouted in Baltimore, Pittsburg, Charleston, Richmond, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati.)

By the end of the 1840s, rural cemeteries were extremely renowned, often-debated, and influential in the emerging, general natural conservation movements of the day. The landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, in fact, used their proliferation to support the development of city parks, saying: *"Judging from the crowds of people in carriages, and on foot, which I find constantly thronging Greenwood and Mount Auburn, I think it is plain enough how much our citizens, of all classes, would enjoy public parks on a similar scale."* With this in mind, it is clearly no coincidence that New York City, still alive with enthusiasm for the relief offered it by Greenwood Cemetery, would in 1856 open the nation's first municipal urban nature-area, dubbing it "Central Park."

And the future?

The garden-cemetery ideals of the mid-1800s have more or less guided the fate of cemeteries through the 20th century: Spaciousness, a variety of old growth trees, streams, "rural" or natural aesthetics… We insist on them as though our cemeteries have always been that way.

Whether or not the continuation of this ideal is good for wildlife depends on how one views the issue. On one hand, a community's acquisition, landscaping, and maintenance of otherwise "wild" acreage might be perceived as a threat to that area's natural inhabitants, such as woodchuck, deer, grouse, and pheasant.

On the other hand, the iron gates that so often surround even our more suburbanized cemeteries (combined with our traditional reverence for the dead) might be thought of as tools for protecting wildlife from more dangerous forms of encroachment. Just as the prized garden cemeteries of the 1800 and 1900s today seem natural oases in today's city centers – might not these cemeteries now being established on the outskirts of town be tomorrow's respites from urbanization?

I personally come down on the side of the latter. And I've but to walk a quarter mile from my house to see proof: On NYS Route 13, just west of the city of Cortland, NY, there is a tiny overgrown cemetery surrounded by split-rail fences and stone walls. At its front, lies a high-speed, two lane highway that acts as a noisy barrier to the shopping center across the road; at its other three sides, a modern factory and its parking lots. To the human eye, this cemetery's island-like juxtaposition is perhaps tragic. But for the area wildlife, it is a blessing… For just as a few blades of crabgrass will find nourishment and space enough to grow in a sidewalk crack – birds, small mammals, wildflowers, and a variety of insects use that solitary graveyard as a sanctuary from a growing community.

In the end, it seems both logical and entirely that we humans bury our dead in an

environment rich with wildlife. Consciously or subconsciously, we recognize that it is in such places that we are most keenly aware of our place in, and most available to, the regenerating life cycle.

"Old yew, which graspest at the stones

That name the underlying dead,

Thy fibers net the dreamless head,

Thy roots are wrapped about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,

And bring the firstling to the flock

And in the dusk of thee the clock

Beats out the little lives of men."

Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memorium"

"Natural" Symbolism of Colonial Gravestones

Symbols of death: Cypress, Willow, or Cedar trees; lilies; ferns; fallen or broken trees (most often the death of a wife)

Symbols of faith: Oak leaves; palm branches

Symbols of immortality: Ivy vines; grapevines or grapes; doves; eagles; figs; pomegranates; roosters; peacocks; seashells; a serpent eating its tail; gourds; the rising sun

Symbols of innocence: Lambs; doves; lilies

Symbols of ill-luck/the underworld: Bats; beetles; ravens; coiled serpents