



An Ode to Chocolate . . . with Wings

A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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It's Valentine's Day as I write this, and I love all those cacao-based treats as much as anyone. But I write of a very different "chocolate." Spell it with a capital "C", and give it feathers. Twenty years hence, young son Duncan will still remember this Chocolate, unlike the candy he'll be wolfing down tonight.

Chocolate is a Red-tailed hawk — most likely a female, judging from her wingspan of over four feet. Such Red-tails are common around here. In fact, local birders sometimes invoke the "Red-tail rule": if you can't positively identify a large hawk, just call it a Red-tail and you'll probably be right.

Chocolate, though, has two unusual qualities. (1) While most Red-tails have whitish breasts and bellies, Chocolate is a beautiful deep brown throughout her body, excepting only the rufous red atop her tail and the grey on her underwings. This "dark morph" color pattern is unusual in Red-tails; it makes her a cinch to identify. (2) She lives in our suburban backyard.

Like all Red-tails, Chocolate likes to perch high and prominently in tall trees, and her favorite such tree is about 120 feet behind our kitchen window. In fact, she's such a regular feature in the tiny green space bordering our house that we greet her almost daily: "Good Morning, Chocolate;" "There's Chocolate;" "How's the hunt going, Chocolate?"

For make no mistake, Chocolate is a predator. We've found furry remains of her prowess on our back lawn, and I've watched her eat an unlucky avian victim while high on her perch, scattering feathers to the wind. To the Finch family, this is all pretty cool.

Apparently it's also "cool" to the birds and squirrels that calmly visit our feeders while Chocolate watches. Although Red-tails will eat those animals, they don't

seem worried. Yet when a Cooper's hawk flashes through the scene, those beasties scramble for cover. Chocolate just seems to be an accepted part of the territory — and so she is with us, too. By now, she's almost a part of our extended family. A related part of our family life is Green Hearts' efforts to bring children and nature back together. That goal can seem pretty daunting amidst the worrisome changes happening to childhood and our growing tendency to think of nature as a place you must drive to. Yet Chocolate reminds me of a simple truth: nature is right outside our windows.

To augment that proximity, there have been plenty of published guides and methods for creating backyard wildlife habitats and other naturalistic home landscapes. Nevertheless, the vast majority of suburban yards remain akin to golf greens: they're manicured to perfection, regularly doused with poisons, and often dressed up with vaporous blooms that better belong in environments halfway around the world.

Caring for these living picture frames around our houses has become a huge industry, ranging from kids with lawnmowers to giant corporations with names that cleverly disguise their work of dispensing toxins. If you need someone to design a perfectly unnatural yard for you, no problem — they're ubiquitous. Need someone to design a "yardscape" for your pooch's pleasure? You can find those too. Need someone to design a natural yard for children? Good luck!

Enter the lesson of Chocolate: it doesn't have to be complicated. In a best case scenario, all homes would border a little piece of wild land, with tall trees for Red-tails, shrub thickets for rabbits and foxes, and endless adventures for our children. Some builders are beginning to understand this, since not only are such residential green spaces great for kids to play in, but they also add market value to housing developments.

But if your family isn't lucky enough to live in such a neighborhood, you can still make a difference — even with a small yard. The catalog of techniques is huge, but you can start with a few simple steps.

- Plant native shrubs, trees, and flowers that are attractive to local wildlife. Any decent nursery can guide you to these and help you with planting.
- Hang up a few bird feeders and birdhouses. The latter make great parent/child craft projects!
- Put a little garden pond in your yard, or just add a basic birdbath and keep the water clean.

- Each spring, turn another piece of your boring lawn into a mulched planting bed for trees and shrubs.
- And stop spraying poison all over your kids' play space. Why do you think those little warning signs are stuck in your lawn after it's been "treated"?

With just a little effort and a bit of time, your yard can start to look more like a piece of nature than like the ninth green. And with that wilder look will come places for your children to play, food and shelter for wildlife, and maybe — if you're lucky — even a bit of Chocolate.