

# *Then There Were Two*

by Emma Ellsworth

We watch the marsh intently. Our little corner of Tully Pond has a reoccurring cast of characters: like a Netflix series, we binge-watch, then anxiously await the arrival of the next season each spring. It's an action-packed time of year. Before the ice is fully thawed, before a single bud swells on the poplars, the migratory birds begin to arrive. The open water around the mouth of a stream that flows into Tully fills with other-worldly hooded mergansers. The stark black and white pattern of the male strikes me as a minimalist, modern art painting, electrically set off by the duck's piercing yellow eyes. Almost a dozen hoodies circle the ice edges in a feeding frenzy. What are they after? Freezing temperatures that night lock up the open water again and they move on. Ospreys and bald eagles visit as they filter back into and through our region, as do batches of

gorgeous bluebills, ringnecks, American mergansers, goldeneyes, and, of course, the familiar mallards.

The Tully Pond "residents" return a few weeks later. The Canada geese are the first to arrive, immediately checking out their "tuft," a small island of grass not five feet across where they have nested each of the last six years since we built our house. Perhaps it's not the same pair, but descendants. We can only conjecture.

Despite the reoccurring nature of their nesting ritual, there is still drama. Ma-rauding geese dare to venture into their vicinity. These unwitting trespassers are greeted with warning honks, followed by aggressive splashing, wing beating, and even vicious attacks. Eventually, the trespassers relent, honking their final cries of defeat as they lift from the pond and disappear over the treetops.



Soon, mom is incubating, her long neck and head barely visible through the marsh grasses. The first green penetrates the drab gray-brown upper reaches of the surrounding maple trees and the nearby field is vibrant with spring flush. Sometimes, as Tom and I savor our morning coffee, we see momma goose tiptoe away from the nest, voraciously gobbling at whatever tastiness lies just below the surface. Dad is on watch. She's not gone long before settling back into her long, diligent sit. I wonder if she gets leg cramps, stiffening up, like I do, after a long morning in the deer stand.

In a few weeks, we see the goslings. They are about the size and color of brand-new tennis balls popped right out of the can; conspicuously bright, they dart between lily pads. At first, they cluster so tight it's hard to discern one from the other. We count and recount, and finally decide, yes, there are five. Last year they lost the first batch of eggs to heavy, early spring rains. Within days, this year's fuzzy little squad spreads out as their feathers begin browning. Mom patiently regathers them, again and again, often calling out to the intrepid explorer who has ranged too far. The occasional shadow of an eagle always sends them scurrying back to their watchful parents.

A few days later, five has become four. Then three. Sadness hits us. Tom and I are, in fact, avid goose hunters and there is nothing like the adrenaline rush of lying in a coffin blind, with my finger on the safety and boxes of shells at my feet. The almost mechanical whirring of goose wings whispers against the cacophony of honks as the birds circle above our decoy spread. I listen impatiently for the call of "take 'em." At which point I leap forward mounting my 12-gauge shotgun to my shoulder while reminding myself to pick a single bird amidst the chaotic array of possible targets. Minutes later, we are rising out of our blinds to assess and collect the birds we have shot before optimistically climbing back into them to await the next opportunity.

But now, that hunting fervor is conspicuously absent. Instead, I hang breathless, missing the two little goslings. I had gotten attached, watching with delight as they explored and darted across the marsh, chasing their siblings. Was it snapping turtle, great horned owl, black bear, or the menacing eagle that feasted on these protein-rich, early spring nibblets? This I cannot know, but I am sad for the parents. They try hard to protect their brood from so many potential predators. How can something so vulnerable stand any chance at all?

By June, the goslings have lost all their chartreuse goofiness, settling firmly into the brown awkward teenage weeks of young goosedom. They are at least fourteen inches high, wandering far afield from their exhausted parents. Now, Tom and I see only two. Again, I am walloped by grief. No! But there were three just this morning? We only left for a few hours. How could this have happened? With much sorrow, Tom and I again remind one another that this missing gosling could have provided an essential meal to a new bear cub or a den of foxes. Even snapping turtles need to eat. Who are we to determine which species deserves more or less sympathy?

But then, the geese make their way back across the pond. And there—barely 20 yards offshore—a little gosling steps out from of its hiding spot amongst grass growing precariously from a tree stump. His peeps are greeted by those of his siblings. Tom and I sit back and smile—as tears pour down my cheeks—and watch the family reunion. Three goslings, making their way in the world, back swimming between their parents under the soft, pink glow of the sunset.



## About the Author

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