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THE CITY LIFE

## Life and Death for the Red Tails

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Athena, a red-tailed hawk that reigned atop the towers of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, has died, apparently from dining on a poisoned rat snatched from below. Chief among the mourners was Jeffrey Kollbrunner, one of the city's more dedicated trackers of raptors. He's the sort who stops traffic on Queens Boulevard to retrieve a bewildered fledgling whose flying lesson suddenly turned pedestrian.

In the current red-tail nesting season, Mr. Kollbrunner is tracking 25 pairs in Queens County as an urban naturalist and consultant for the Audubon Society. "The first-born baby scared me the other day, teetering unattended at the edge of the nest," he says. He watched it all on the Hawk-cam, a 24/7 Web camera he has pointed on the nest of Momma and Poppa, red tails he has monitored like family for 12 years.

Momma returned in time with tasty prey, sparing junior a 90-foot flop to the sidewalk.

Succulent pigeons can outrace red hawks in a straight line, so Momma and Poppa developed an ambush strategy. He sneaks up to roust rooftop flocks toward Momma as she flies out of the sun for a kill.

Mr. Kollbrunner, born in Queens, found his first hawk sighting so exotic that he became a wildlife photographer and a teacher of ways to track life along the skyline. For him, romance teems in the airy jungle of kestrels, peregrine falcons, coopers and sharp-shinned hawks, plus his red tails.

He cherishes Golden Boy, a prize offspring of Momma and Poppa, for a New York moment of unexpected compassion. After fully fledging the nest, Golden Boy still stayed behind to protect a weaker sibling. His first hunts were devoted to feeding the sibling. He nattered and nagged and refused to go his own way until the bird found the strength and the savvy to get up and take on the city.

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