



Field Notes

There's No Place Like Home

By *Dave Bock*



Had Dorothy landed here, instead of Oz, she would have been no less convinced that she was not in Kansas anymore. The Hopewell Rocks of New Brunswick, Canada, feel like one of the bizarre landscapes from the Star Wars universe. I half expected to meet some strange alien among the improbable rock formations along the beach. And why not? Just across the Bay of Fundy, a few days prior, we had been hunting fossils at Joggins Fossil Cliffs in search of some of our evolutionary predecessors. They too seemed alien.

The trail to the bay wound through a densely wooded area, concealing the beach until the last moment when my son and I stepped out into the afternoon sun and onto a wooden deck one-hundred feet above the beach. If the view wasn't enough to blow your mind, we discovered a peregrine falcon living on a cliff face. Peregrines are the fastest birds on the planet. We discovered not just one, but a pair and three young falcons! The youngsters were flapping their wings dangerously close to the edge of the narrow ledge their parents had chosen to call home. Their flapping was not just the random carrying on of an unruly bunch of kids; it was practice for flying as they would soon have to fend for themselves. This means taking the ultimate leap of faith and jumping into oblivion. It brings the phrase "learning on the fly" to its ultimate meaning.

My awe was interrupted by the booming radio announcer-like voice of a park ranger who abruptly declared, "Look at the beauty of that bird!" We decided to head down to the beach and leave the ranger and his tour group behind just as they all pulled their cameras out in unison with Olympic precision.

From below, we could see one of the adult falcons returning from the bay with a fish. The mature birds took turns, about once an hour, hunting for their young and for themselves. The three young falcons were all healthy and almost ready to be on their own. That doesn't happen often. Usually, only one or two survive. And for both parents to be so attentive to the young, well, that doesn't happen often either. Sometimes the male is less attentive and more concerned about his own meals. This was like that perfect TV family that can only exist in thirty minute commercial filled intervals. The Brady Bunch at one-hundred feet.

We walked along the beach between the towering spires of rock and sea caves. Each spire narrower at the base than at the top and each one topped with trees and grass. The forty foot difference between high and low tide is responsible for these formations, wearing away the lower part of the rock, the part exposed to the tide, and leaving the top intact. Growing like a weed at the base of the rocks was the edible seaweed called bladder wrack. Within its leaves are pill sized bladders filled with air which is an evolutionary adaptation that keeps them afloat. It's used in food and as a dietary supplement and in 1811, it was discovered to be a source of iodine and was used by people to treat goiter.

The tide would be returning soon so we had to start heading back. Paradise becomes a death trap when the tide returns (unless you're bladder wrack). I had to put my camera down and look at this place in a relaxed way and with my own eyes so that my only memory of this place would not be its fuzzy image on my camera's LCD display. I looked at the other people on the beach and wondered what they were thinking. I thought about this place, about this planet, and our context in the universe. In a fourteen-billion year old universe, places like the Hopewell Rocks are less than the blink of an eye. A solid mass of rock eroded by the tides into something the human mind finds beautiful. One day they will have eroded into sand and be gone. And here we were, in the backyard of five peregrine falcons, to witness it.

Due to Earth's location at the outer edge the Milky Way, it's sometimes referred to as a backwater planet, but in a place like this, I side with Dorothy. There's no place like home...