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LIFESTYLE

Marie Winn, Who Chronicled New York Wildlife—and the People Drawn to It—Dies at 88

Her most-famous subject: Pale Male, a red-tailed hawk who inspired protests after his nest was moved from a Fifth Avenue luxury apartment building

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Marie Winn wrote about the biodiversity of New York City. PHOTO: WINN-MILLER FAMILY

One rainy afternoon in December 2004, workers ascended the facade of a 12-story luxury apartment building overlooking New York's Central Park, tore out a

dense buildup of sticks and other material crammed into one of the cornices, and shoved it all into garbage bags.

This was a hawk's nest, assembled over the preceding decade by a male red-tailed hawk and its succession of mates. The male had a name—Pale Male—and, being a rare bird with rarefied tastes in nesting sites, had amassed a following among birders and New Yorkers at large since first appearing in the vicinity in 1991.

Consequently, soon after the nest was removed from the facade of 927 Fifth Ave., protesters arrived at the foot of the building. Within a few days, more than 100 people were gathered, giving fiery interviews to TV news vans and waving “Honk 4 Hawks” signs at passing cars.



Protesters gathered after the removal of Pale Male's nest from an Upper East Side building in 2004.
PHOTO: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

A conflict between birders and the building's co-op board had reached a breaking point—a saga *Vanity Fair* called “part Bonfire of the Vanities, part Jonathan Livingston Seagull.” For years, the wealthy, privacy-prizing residents of 927 Fifth had resented Pale Male as a squatter, one who not only feasted on bloody rats and pigeons outside their windows but had drawn crowds of committed hawk-watchers and tourists to a bench across the street in the park, all with their binoculars and telescopes pointed up at the residents' apartments. (One had a telescope so hefty it had to be wheeled in on a battery-powered cart, and so powerful it could see the rings of Saturn.)

The writer Marie Winn, who died Dec. 25 in a Manhattan hospital at age 88, was both a chronicler and an impresario of the hawk-watching scene. Winn named Pale Male, for the bird's distinctive coloring, and in 1998, she wrote a bestselling book about his life, "Red-Tails in Love," a work awash in wonderment as much for Central Park's birds and greater ecology as for the diverse subculture of New Yorkers drawn to it. In interviews, Winn referred to Pale Male as "our hero," "a mythical figure" and "a venerable guy."

The co-op board of 927 Fifth would ultimately reverse course and install a special platform on which Pale Male and his mate could begin to rebuild—cowing to what Winn described as "a firestorm of outrage."

But that outrage, finding a communal outlet, had also produced a peculiar joy. Winn, for example, spent time protesting alongside her friend Rebekah Creshkoff in two giant, feathery cardinal costumes. (The rental shop Creshkoff went to didn't have any hawk costumes.) The costumes were like sports-mascot get-ups, Creshkoff explained; you talked through an inconspicuous grate in the beak. "But Marie found it frustrating to talk to people that way," she added—no one could see how big Winn was smiling. "So she found herself taking her head off a lot."

The 'Earlybirds' meet at dawn

Winn started birding in Central Park in 1991, frequently riding her bike from her apartment on Riverside Drive to meet up with a group she called the "Earlybirds" at 6 a.m. The Earlybirds were a subset of a larger association of Central Park birders dubbed "The Regulars." The savviest Regulars were "The Big Guns."

Winn first encountered the birders through a nature column she started writing for The Wall Street Journal in 1989. Long before urban wildlife was something many American nature lovers learned to appreciate, Winn ranged around the city chronicling its biodiversity and, even more memorably, the New Yorkers who were enamored, aggravated or befuddled by those critters.

With a stellar ear for dialogue and a lilt to her prose reminiscent of Joseph Mitchell—one of Winn's favorite writers, and a friend—Winn covered an effort to quantify how many migrating birds were colliding with skyscrapers (the census

started at sunup at the World Trade Center to “beat the sweepers who might whisk away the unsightly little corpses,” Winn wrote) and the improbable appearance of a coyote in Central Park, and the gaggle of cops, civil servants and others scrambling to capture it. (“You could tell nobody there knew how to hunt down a coyote,” one supervisor told her.)

If it flew, squirmed or skittered through Manhattan, Winn could get excited about it. After seeing a turtle in Central Park one day, she exclaimed to a Scientific American podcast, “It was like meeting up with a prehistoric creature!” After “Red-Tails in Love,” Winn got deep into “mothing” (i.e., observing moths) and other nocturnal wildlife and wrote “Central Park in the Dark.” Creshkoff said, “I felt that Central Park was her muse.”

Pale Male was her greatest subject—a high drama that Winn stuck with for years. She wrote of the hawk finding various mates, all whom the hawk-watchers gave names like “First Love” and “Chocolate” and some of whom met untimely deaths. (One ate a poisoned pigeon. One was struck on the New Jersey Turnpike.) And she was there in 1995 when Pale Male successfully reared his first chicks after what Winn called a couple of “serious bummer years.” They were the first of roughly two dozen offspring he’d father in his nest on 927 Fifth Ave. A bird presumed to be Pale Male died in 2023.

Speaking to the New York Times, Winn compared the euphoria of watching those first three juveniles lift off from the nest to the jolt of clarity she sometimes experienced while working on a piece of writing. After a long, torturous stretch of not knowing how she’d ever impose a structure on the chaos of her material, she said, “There is that moment [when] you know you have found your way. A little moment, but an unbelievable moment. I feel marvelous. The anxiety lifting gives you a kind of soaring.”



Pale Male in 2004. PHOTO: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

Winn and the other hawk-watchers loved telling Pale Male's story and offering curious passerby peeks through their binoculars and telescopes. In a 2009 documentary, "The Legend of Pale Male," Winn said: "Kids come and say, 'Who do these birds belong to?' They can't understand that there's something wild in New York!" She wrote of showing off Pale Male to everyone from recovering drug addicts to celebrities like Glenn Close. Mary Tyler Moore, who lived in the building where the hawks nested, was an important ally. When Pale Male's nest was ripped down in 2004, Moore told the press, "I was like an out-of-her-mind mother who had just lost her babies."

Jessica G. Wilson, executive director of NYC Bird Alliance (until recently known as NYC Audubon Society) called Pale Male "New York City's first celebrity bird." Not only did the dispersal of his offspring fuel a comeback for the species in the city, Wilson explained, but Pale Male helped repopulate the city with nature lovers too: "Pale Male and Marie's writing opened New Yorkers' eyes to seeing that there is incredible biodiversity right here in New York City."

Wilson added that it was largely through Winn's writing that she herself first discovered birding as a high-schooler in the city in the 1990s.

From Prague to New York

Marie Wienerová was born Oct. 21, 1936, in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Her mother, Hanna Taussigova, was a lawyer, and her father, Josef Wiener, a psychiatrist who loved tramping around the woods fervently identifying mushrooms and birds.

The family immigrated in 1939 to New York City, where they changed their surname. Winn had one sister, the New Yorker journalist Janet Malcolm, who died in 2021. During the Pale Male protests, Malcolm was spotted with a sign that read “Repent” on one side and “God is watching” on the other.

In 1958, Winn was caught up—unwittingly, she said—in a notorious TV quiz show scandal, after another contestant discovered the producers of “Dotto” were feeding Winn the answers to questions. The following year, she graduated from Columbia University after first attending Radcliffe, and in 1961, she married Allan Miller, a conductor who later became a documentary filmmaker. Miller survives Winn, as do their two sons, Steven and Michael, who is an editor at the Journal.

Winn managed to land her first byline while working as a receptionist at the San Francisco News during a break from college—though the paper introduced her to readers as “a pert little brunette who occupies the second-floor reception desk.” Pursuing a career as a serious nonfiction writer became even more difficult once Winn was raising two small children at home. But Winn was determined. More important, she had the ability to get profoundly fascinated by whatever she found in front of her.

When Winn had babies, she wrote, “I hardly expected to find myself interested in nothing but babies.” But she did—and with such breadth and voraciousness that she was soon compelled to publish “The Baby Reader,” a selection of 56 writings about babies and child rearing she had pulled from literature around the world. At home, Allan Miller was always playing their boys songs on the piano, so Winn published “The Fireside Book of Children’s Songs,” with arrangements by her husband. And as their children started asking questions about the world, Winn wrote a series of short books, “The Basic Concept Books,” to demystify topics like laws and taxes.



The Winn family, Marie second from left, in a 1942 photo made for the Office of War Information.
PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, FSA/OWI COLLECTION

“She was an aspiring writer looking for subjects,” Michael Miller said, “and the subjects were crawling around her house. So she got deeply interested in *them*.” He went on, “My brother and I were the original urban wildlife.”

Winn’s breakthrough came in 1977 with the publication of “The Plug-in Drug,” a critique of television’s corrosive effect on children and families. “We feel increasingly helpless,” Winn wrote, “and our dependence on television is surely a reflection of this helplessness. For if activity is futile in modern society, if our efforts are meaningless in the face of an uncontrollable and unfathomable bureaucracy, then why not settle into the pleasures of total passivity?” She followed it with “Children Without Childhood: Growing Up Too Fast in the World of Sex and Drugs” (1983) and “Unplugging the Plug-in Drug” (1987). She also translated Czech literature, including plays by Václav Havel.

Winn’s fears about TV didn’t center on what children were watching—simply that they were watching it so much. Their attention was being entrapped by a completely passive, fixed experience—looking at a screen—and thus sealed away from personal relationships and the physical world, realms whose richness,

meaning and beauty, Winn argued, deepened the more attention one lavished on them.

Her later infatuation with urban birding, and with writing about urban birders, proved this was true. In “Red-Tails in Love,” she wrote: “The Regulars notice what others have long learned to ignore: the sights and sounds, smells, textures, and tastes of the world around them. Forget the self and its hungry needs. Pay attention to tiny details.”

Winn noticed all of that, and she noticed the noticers, too.

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