

Black River

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12 November 1990, revised 21 November 2010

Late one Fall, as I was walking home from the Western Pennsylvanian university I worked at, I happened to look up and noticed a huge stream, a black river, of birds flying overhead. A dark, solid band of birds extended from one horizon to the other. Ignoring the obvious danger, I wandered over to campus to better observe them from below. By putting my hand in the air and timing how long it took approximately 1,000 birds to fly past it, I estimated the flow rate to be about 15,000 birds per minute, or 900,000 birds per hour!

Chirping and obviously very excited, large swarms of birds would break away from the river in the sky to land on the now sagging trees filled with birds. There were more pounds of bird flesh perched on campus than human flesh. Even begrudging only one IQ point per bird, there were easily over hundred birds for each student. The birds had intellectual sway over the campus.

The sheer noise from all the chirping was incredible. It was as if each bird was compelled to tell amazing stories about cats and worms to all within earshot. Overhead the river of birds sometimes swayed to the east or the west and then slowly corrected itself, as if obeying the laws of viscous flow for some fluid flowing through the atmosphere. The rate of flow was quite impressive, at forty or so miles per hour.

One can only conjecture from where over the horizon all these winged compatriots were coming. Of even more interest is where they are going. There is a great deal of enthusiasm for the journey. How great to be free of all ties and obligations, of physical possessions, of past and future; to be surrounded by others sharing your identical predicament! Those fellow travelers around you are strangers, yet friends and soul mates who know you as well as you know yourself. Being totally focused on where the winged conveyor belt above will send you, where you will be nesting tonight, is a freedom greater than any man-made document ever gave a human. It is a pleasure greater than that accorded most people. I found myself slowly travelling south, following the black river above. Such is the power of migration.