

Sharing Spaces

By Marian Thomas

The observation of wildlife in Boise can, at best, be periodic and usually requires us to head for the mountains, desert, or to a national park. It is true that when we walk or bike along the Greenbelt or enter Katherine Albertson Park, we might occasionally spot a mule deer, bobcat, beaver, or muskrat hidden among the cottonwoods and willows, but those viewings have become fewer and fewer.

During those rare occasions when these animals come into view, I think of the words of Barry Lopez, the naturalist, who wrote of the importance of observing and experiencing animals and trying to understand the “mystery inherent in the animals (we) observe.” He wrote how these viewings “draw us to wildlife and the natural world” and can help us learn to “coexist with nature.”

I felt that mystery a few years ago when I realized an owl had taken up residency in my backyard. It was a wonderous occasion, for while I was at first unaware of her presence, after her eggs hatched, her four owlets would sit in the evening on my fence and speak “owl” for a period of time. I was smitten, and would enjoy those evenings watching the family chattering away. They were mysterious, beautiful, and entertaining. Obvious was how the mother owl was carefully instructing her offspring. How sad it was when lessons were completed and the fledglings flew off to experience life elsewhere.

Occasionally in Boise, a deer will wander into my neighborhood, a few miles from the Boise River. One late evening while rounding the last curve on my way home, a deer darted in front of my car. We both stopped. There in the dark, we looked directly into each other’s eyes. I wanted the moment to last and could understand why Native Americans considered deer to be spiritual beings. But she darted away, and I wondered, as I had before, how we might both safely inhabit this space.

Last year a deer visited my subdivision for several hours and took an afternoon nap on my neighbor’s front lawn. The deer gave the impression that she belonged in the area and took part in a meal from the shrubs my neighbor had so carefully planted. I gladly gave up some of my own landscaping to experience the deer so closely.

A few springs ago, a mother deer deposited her fawn under the bushes right outside the Yanke building while she wandered off to find food each day. The baby would sit quietly and developed quite a delighted following of those working inside the building. Eventually, the baby became too active, and both mother and fawn wandered back to the river leaving the onlookers hoping she would return the next spring.

Such sightings become rarer as civilization reaches further and further up along the Boise River and developments cut the corridors that historically brought the deer and other animals down from the mountains to the river. Sadly, each year, I can spot a deer that has been injured either from dogs or from cars they have met. Cohabiting with humans is a dangerous undertaking for native species.

While the deer are challenged by building spread, other smaller animals also seek safety with fewer places to inhabit. Coming home one evening, a badger crossed the road in front of me on its way to a nearby park. This surprised me as I hadn't realized how adaptable the badger has become. I was not aware that they lived in the city. From the same park, racoons periodically multiple in great numbers and wander into my neighborhood to eat grapes or check out the backyard ponds for a fish dinner. On a particularly lucky evening, I will spot a red fox running back to the park and away from busy streets. The few times I have wandered into their view, they will stop and stare directly at me, then quickly turn and disappear.

As we become urbanized, it is no surprise that when we do happen upon a wild animal, the meeting can be overwhelming and cause us to consider our relationship to the natural world and whether we truly value other species.

Once while on a bus tour from Anchorage to Denali National Park, the tour bus stopped to let us exit the and view the majestic Denali peak rising up through the clouds. As we stood there, the driver quietly told all of us to stand perfectly still and not make a sound. In front of us, not more than 20 feet away a mother grizzly and her two cubs were crossing the road. The mother noted our presence but was more concerned with moving her cubs to the other side of the road. We watched the family as they moved slowly through the trees, the mother keeping a sharp eye on us until all three slowly disappeared from view. Awestruck from this sighting, I understood why Native Americans associate the grizzly with wisdom and leadership. I'm sure I will never again come that close to a grizzly. I can only imagine the emotion and fear that befalls those who accidentally come even closer to a grizzly in the wild.

Similar emotions arise at the sighting of animals while driving through or hiking Yellowstone National Park. There we expect to see wildlife and are sorely disappointed if our expectations are not met. When a herd of buffalo overtake the road and walk next to halted cars, I note how many tourists slowly lower their windows and quickly touch the bison as a herd makes its way through the long line of cars. Wisely most tourists patiently remain in their cars as the bison meander along. Tourists can't help but be entranced by the closeness to these powerful animals.

On my last trip to Yellowstone, word spread that a wolf had been sighted in a meadow within viewing distance from the road. Dozens of us arose before dawn the next day to drive to the area and wait to watch the wolf return to feast on a deer carcass that lay across the river. Before sunrise, the wolf appeared between the trees and moved toward the carcass. The audience watched in awe of this seldom seen animal. The wolf stared at us for a moment before feasting on its prey and periodically surveyed the audience.

As our city and roadways continue to expand, we invade and lessen the habitat and pathways of animals. At the same time, our off-road vehicles and a growing population allow easier human access to spaces where animals have lived for centuries. In those spaces, we seek to connect with wildlife and try to understand how animals and humans can live in harmony. However, when we journey to Yellowstone, the Idaho Wilderness, Alaska or even further, to Africa, we can sense the loss of any natural space for these animals. Because we know of these challenges, we can feel only brief excitement or confusion at a sighting of any undomesticated animal.

Periodically a black bear will appear in the Boise area. A few years ago, one climbed a tree near a local school. The school went into lockdown. Hours of patient coaxing finally resulted in moving the bear into captivity at a local bear refuge. When a cougar is spotted on the Greenbelt, word spreads in neighboring subdivisions, and fear keeps us in our homes. A lone elk on the Warm Springs Golf Course brings wonder at the sight, and causes us to pause and contemplate the space we have overtaken. All of these events would suggest that what we seek is what Barry Lopez describes as “an unfamiliar patience” with our fellow animal and the acknowledgement that we share similar space and needs.