

Hebert's Wandering Nature Trail

(excerpts from Hebert Returns to America)

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It has been said by students of reincarnation that one chooses one's parents, place to live, and general circumstances that one is born into. In that case, when I did my choosing, I must have been distracted because, as a child, I detested the urban locale. I often wished that I could grow up in the countryside, the Wild West, a leech-infested swamp, or any tract of forest dense enough to require Houdini mentoring for a weasel to pass through.

The city had its own distinct nature life. In the morning you could wake to the sound of birds coughing. They say that if you drink water from the Fountain of Youth you will never get a day older. The same could be said of certain sources of America's drinking water.

But, to make the most of it, I would wander the minute bits of nature found in parks and ravines, befriending birds, animals and wildlands. Some of these regions you could enter at peril of becoming hopelessly lost for up to four minutes. I still remember the exaltation of sunrise over an industrial smokestack, and listening to the sounds of pop cans clattering along in a creek, while watching the

water's brown and bubbling surge wend its way downstream.

I had an instinctive rapport with animals. By age 9, I could speak several languages, including raccoon, weasel, white-tailed deer, and rainbow trout. I had great patience in those days. For two hours every day, I worked diligently at teaching my pet turtle to fetch. I kept at it, stuck it out - it was three full years before I would admit defeat.

Animals and birds are not only intelligent, aware, and willful, they also can communicate effectively with humans and relate to them as close, caring friends.

Once you're in tight with a porcupine, for instance, you can count on it to resist gossiping behind your back. Mink can be very loyal and forgiving, almost to excess - one needs vigilance against codependency. And you can depend on a gopher for emotional support while going through a relationship breakup, or even if you just need a place to cool out for a few days.

One dynamic worth mentioning is that I found it more productive to start communicating with domestic animals before taking on the wild variety. After I enrolled in Avian as a Second Language classes, I began to develop a rapport, at the expense of several cartons of Saltines, with a neighbor's parrot. But it was not until, under threat of withholding the Bretons - gourmand of every self-respecting parrot - that Pawl-Lee (he was an upscale bird

who had refused the cliché rendition of his moniker) caved in and forked over systematic code-breaking data.

From the parrot, I moved on to urban residents of the avian population - pigeons, house sparrows, and starlings. I was able, over time, to break through the slang-thick brogue of the sparrow, and developed a fair bit of vocabulary in Pidgin-pigeon, but called it a day when faced with the pretentious and unpunctuated stream of “poetry” the starling put forth.

As I dove in deeper to the interspecies communication project, I found myself quickly overwhelmed by the challenge of rodentine verb conjugations, and even more so with syntax orientation in porcupinese. And talk about inflection, the business of *how* you say it, not *what* you say (generally, deep voice = hostile, high voice = submissive), well - all that went out the window when I pissed a group of deer off to the point of needing to hurriedly scale a tree. For two hours, perched aloft, I found myself scrambling to explain in halting ungulate that it was only due to poor intonation that my well-meant, “how velvety falls the morning light upon your antlers,” could be misconstrued as, “you guys are a buncha morons.”

After the harrowing angry deer episode, I chose to cool my jets for a while. In time, I managed to overcome my trepidation sufficiently to approach a snowshoe rabbit, but soon found myself over my head trying to follow the thread of the rabbit’s existential philosophy. Even denser, I found, were the mental gymnastics of the muskrat’s post-structuralism. Compared with these savants, I was rather

taken aback when faced with the beaver's crude logger mentality.

The sun's warmth is getting stronger, the daylight growing longer. It won't be so easily to sneak around anymore without getting caught. Loons are making an appearance now, making me feel at home again. It's good to have your power animal close by, I feel bold, kooky, ready for action. Seems like most people see the loon as a deranged duck. But, I say you can't find anything more normal - the loon is the vanilla-est bird there is, in my book. If you want spumoni, then scope out the heron - *there's* a long-legged ding-dong!

The bears are out now, too. And the question arises - can I pass through the woods without getting mugged by a bruin? One day, I wander down a dirt road that degenerates into a horse track. I'm daydreaming away in tricolor and run smack into a mama black bear. Two cubs are scurrying up a tree behind her, and I realize I've got, oh, maybe 2-3 seconds to make the right choice or die. Let's see, do I melt into a puddle? Do I yell and flap my arms? Do I launch into my Three Stooges imitation (3-way split personality)? Or do I just hunker down and take it on the chin?

In the end, while sporting a wide smile, I compliment Lady Bruin on her exceptional offspring. But she reads the teeth for aggression, and the speech for insult and, last thing I remember I receive a swift cuff upside the head and drop into oblivion.

I must have considered oblivion to be a worthwhile locale to visit, as I didn't budge from there until the middle of the night, when I awoke to find myself in pitch dark with a pounding headache. The headache, I welcomed, as it told me I was not dead. Orientation was another matter. Ever have to navigate through woods dark as the inside of a cow? I got out, eventually and, all things considered, can't complain as it would have been ten times harder to navigate from the inside of a mama bear.

One day, as I travel on, I witness a snake getting run over by a vehicle. As I draw near, I observe that it's pregnant. Working quickly, I perform a cesarean, and 50-60 tiny snakes emerge. I stop short of slapping bums, they're either going to sink or swim on their own. About half the babies are still alive, and slither off in all directions.

Since the snake midwife experience, I can sense that I am pervaded with serpent charm. This might come in handy. I could use a little belly-crawling power to slither out of some of the jams I get myself into. Then the inner weasel overhears my thoughts, and grows incensed. It's *his* job, how dare the snake horn in on its turf!?! The weasel and snake go at each other. After a while, I tune them out - let them duke it out, I've got to get on with life.

Now the sun has set, darkness drops its rusty anvil, and some fireflies begin to emerge, their fairy lights punctuating the darkness in short blips of incandescence. I run after the luminous moths with a cigarette, trying to

bum a light, but they evade me at every turn. To heck with them, they are annoying, incendiary creatures, anyway - such show-offs, loony little lantern bearers. I turn my back on them in a nicotine fit, cursing, and find a pile of moss to crawl under for the night.

Next morning, it's a sunny, high-summer day. Surely, during this season, while we are crossing the alpine meadow of the sun, we are in the kingdom of the gods. Fittingly, I come across his Royal Highness, the Monarch butterfly. Following the erratic flight of this orange and black blossom leads me to a pond where water lilies are in full bloom, lotus crowns of ivory petals radiating like little microwave clusters. Beneath the lilies, fish are lazily coasting, causing me to wonder if all fish are born under the sign Pisces.