Lessons from song dogs

Barry Scholl

A few years ago, while camping in a remote canyon (I forget exactly where), I was shocked from sleep by a sound that has stayed with me ever since.

I’ve been sleeping on the ground for more years than I care to remember and have squandered countless nights entombed in a sleeping bag futilely trying to dislodge the pebbles that had somehow lodged under my back during the night. But I had never been so violently dragged from a deep sleep. Undiminished by a city’s glare, stars soared overhead, big as dinner plates, and a satellite blinked in its ongoing orbit around the Earth like a blue nightlight, the only sign that another human construct existed in the entire universe. Wrapped to my chin in a mummy bag against the bite of early spring air, I decided the sound that had awakened me came from a dream.

Then the coyote howled again. First one, then a second, and, I thought, a third, they sang a ragged, undulating chorus that was neither nearby nor far away. In the close canyon, the howls seemed to originate from the top of each butte and beyond each boulder, like a troupe of ventriloquist song dogs. Spurred by a deep racial memory, the hairs on the back of my neck were suddenly stiff as quills. I unzipped my bag, reached for the dim shapes of my boots, and decided to spend the remainder of the night in my truck.

Then something happened, something that didn’t seem too significant at the time but in the intervening years has gone on to assume greater meaning. Consciously wrestling against every image perpetuated by popular culture, I took a deep breath, then another, and lay back down in my bag, hands crossed behind my head, intent on remaining where I was. Intellectually, I understood that the trio of coyote musicians (at least I

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thought there were three; as they were in Trickster mode, there could easily have been as many as six or as few as two) presented me absolutely no threat. But it took a while to convince my slamming heart of that fact. Just think of them as dogs, I reminded myself—not as the opportunistic heirs to a mantle abdicated when Big Bad Wolf went out for lunch and never came back.

That worked, sort of, though if I dozed off, it was only fitfully. Ignoring my presence, the coyotes continued their on-and-off practice session (one animal in particular seemed to be having trouble mastering his part and repeated the same three-note figure over and over until his compatriots were satisfied and once again began howling lustily). When the sky at last began to perceptibly brighten, the coyotes grew silent, padding off to their dens to do whatever coyotes do with their days. But I could swear one of them paused partway up the trail, turned around, and aimed a farewell yip my way.

As outdoor drama, it may not have rivaled Ed Abbey’s encounter with the bullsnakes in *Desert Solitaire* or Peter Matthiessen’s pursuit of the elusive (and possibly illusory) snow leopard in that same-titled book, but my Coyote Concert, as I later dubbed it, affected me in ways my direct encounters with wildlife haven’t. Maybe because it was an unexpected encounter, something that could never be replicated, I took it as a kind of reminder of what a remarkable place the world can be if only we open our senses to experience its wonders.

As I read this marvelous book, I found myself recalling that experience. It goes without saying that Hengesbaugh’s a gifted writer—evocative, passionate, at turns dismayed by how much damage has been done to our planet’s fellow inhabitants and guardedly optimistic about what can be done to mitigate future damage. Like the naturalist author David Quammen, who once confided to me that he was “hopeful but not optimistic” about the future of the planet’s open spaces and endangered species, Hengesbaugh is, at the core, a pragmatist with a heart.

And, it must be added, a finely developed sense of the absurd. Hengesbaugh delights in the unlikely facts of wild creatures and happily shares them with us, his readers. Thus, we are introduced to butt-kicking pikas, bison wrestle-mania, and (my personal favorite) owls that ward off predators by perfectly imitating a rattlesnake’s buzz. Who ever would have guessed that nature’s denizens represented such a menagerie? So overjoyed
was I with the creatures that inhabit these vividly alive pages that I wanted nothing more than to put the book momentarily aside and wrestle my way to the top of the nearest tree, in search of a flying squirrel.

But once I came down to resume my reading, there would be no shortage of sobering information awaiting me, as Hengesbaugh points out: Glen Canyon, for the time being at least, is gone—sacrificed to provide Las Vegas casinos with overflowing fountains and Los Angeles with sparkling swimming pools. The state’s few remaining black bear and cougar are pursued in the name of “sport,” and amphibians (a barometer species of the planet’s environmental health) are disappearing at an alarming rate. Meanwhile, mankind, despite increasingly desperate insistence to the contrary, does not exist apart from the health of the planet.

In fact, one of the most remarkable elements of this remarkable book is Hengesbaugh’s ability to vividly link cause and effect, thereby illustrating the interconnectedness of life. Thus, as we eradicate wolves, coyotes flow into their empty niche. And when we respond to a burgeoning coyote population by poisoning, trapping, shooting, and otherwise attempting to exterminate them, the coyotes react quite sensibly by bearing more pups at a younger age.

In the end, Hengesbaugh’s achievement is that this work is neither a blank indictment of human development nor a justification for reckless forms of it. Like the coyotes I witnessed that night, nature can be—frequently is—unpredictable. And in spite of our sheath of civilization, we humans are nature. Like the cow parsnip, loggerhead shrike, and black-footed ferret, we are all “creatures of habitat.”

And for reminding us of that fact, we should applaud Mark Hengesbaugh for this book.
Kit fox pups.