

The Creatures of the Night

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In one of the old Dracula movies, travelers through the eerie Transylvanian wilderness are serenaded by the howling of wolves in the distance, and Lon Chaney (as the Vampire) murmurs, "Ah, the children of the night – what a lovely song they sing". Sort of like the song that the coyotes sing out at Anza.

There has been some discussion about encounters with wildlife while stargazing. That reminded me that some of my most memorable observations were of critters under the stars:

In the "wee hours" under the stars in the California desert, my study of some faint astronomical fuzzy was interrupted by the eerie feeling that I was being watched, and a barely-perceptible hint of movement off to my right. I looked up, and there, staring at me was the biggest raccoon I've ever imagined. I mean BIG-- the mother of all raccoons – when she sat up on her haunches, she must have been over 3 feet tall. We were separated by perhaps 8 feet. I wasn't sure whether to be worried or not. Somehow, I'd completely missed the classes on raccoons in school, and didn't know if they had sharp claws, big teeth, or aggressive tendencies. I did vaguely remember hearing a recent news report that some of the local critters were rabid (or was it that their fleas carried Black Plague? I wasn't sure). My very limited woodcraft suggested "first thing: show no fear". So I held my ground. She held hers, maintaining her curious study of me, as intently as I was studying her. Well, I couldn't let this go on all night, so after a short spell, I decided to take one confident step toward her. She responded by taking one confident step toward me. Now we were perhaps 5 feet apart. At length, uncertainty was overwhelmed by curiosity, and the irresistible cuteness of her perfectly-groomed, bandit-mask face, and I took another step toward her, which prompted a slow turn and waddling retreat on her part.

On a summer night in a pitch-dark meadow at Drakesbad, in the middle of the Lassen National Park, it was so dark that I literally couldn't see my hands in front of my face, unless I held them up to the sky, where I could see my fingers silhouetted against the granular glow of the Milky Way soaring overhead. I had forgotten my flashlight, and so was operating my 'scope by feel, reveling in the clarity with which I was able to see objects that were too faint to even attempt at my home observing sites. Then, out of the distance, came a "thump-swoosh-clump-swoosh", as something very large, and very heavy, walked through the tall brush and soft dirt of the meadow. It took perhaps 5 seconds to confirm that whatever it was, was headed in my general direction from the far side of the meadow. Oh, boy, my mind riffled through the rolodex of creatures that might live in this wilderness: we've got deer, probably moose, certainly bears, plenty of mountain lions, maybe Bigfoot, and who knows what else. I stamped my feet, hollered a couple of times, and began giving serious attention to the problem of how to use a 13-inch Dobsonian as a defensive weapon, as the clumping and swooshing approached, passed by, and (happily) moved away from me. I was just calming down, when the horses in the corral at the other side of the ranch started setting up a yowl, mixing whinnies with kicking of the stalls and all sorts of equine objections to whatever it was that had entered their neighborhood. I never did find out what it was, but I guarantee that I'll be able to recognize those footsteps if I ever hear them again!

A few years ago, contributors to the internet newsgroup sci.astro.amateur shared their stories of encounters with critters in the night. Here are a few. (I hope I've given credit to the correct witnesses).

- *Jeff Medkeff shared two stories:*

One night (at about 4:00 AM actually) I went to bed, leaving a dewed-up Newtonian set up in my back pasture, the idea being that the dew would dissipate and I would come out and cap up the telescope once I woke up some hours later. When I arrived out there the following noon I found that a bird had begun to build a nest in the OTA. I discovered this by swinging the telescope to the northward-pointing 'stowed' position, and finding the telescope severely out of balance. I executed a German flip and found it still out of balance, but heard something rattling around in there when I moved the scope. I pointed the telescope at about 40 degrees above the horizon and stuck my head in front of it so as to look down the tube. The bird, apparently seeing

me in the primary mirror, exploded out of the top of the tube in a Mach 3 panic! (I ducked – it's amazing how fast reflexes are in true emergencies). Bryan Greer, maker of Protostar spiders and secondary holders, has a bird proof product there, among their considerable other virtues!

My logbook reveals that at the beginning of one night I tossed my heavy coat on the ground for convenient storage until I got cold. I later put it on then took it off much more rapidly on account of the snake that had taken up residence in one of the arms. In rattlesnake country, this can be more dangerous than unnerving, but in this case, the snake was a fine specimen of darter, so more unnerving than dangerous. On another occasion I found a field mouse in my coat. Presumably the latter is thankful not to have met the former..."

- *Jim (no last name recorded), told a cautionary tale:*

About 6-7 years ago, I went up the Blue Ridge Parkway about 20 miles from town, to get away from the city lights. To "enhance" the C-8+, I also took a drive-thru supper, hot chocolate in a thermos, and a couple of oatmeal cookies. I set the 'scope up behind the car in the twilight, ate a couple of tacos, then spent several pleasant hours observing, with the hatch back open (it makes a handy table, you can hear the stereo, etc.) stopping a couple of times to munch on the goodies lying in the hatchback. I packed up about eleven, and headed back down the mountain to town. Less than half a mile from where I'd been observing, I saw a large shaggy dog run across the road in the headlights. He turned and ran parallel to the road, and as I passed him, I realized that his back was a bit higher than the lower window-line on the car (944), and that he was *not* a dog! Hello, Mr. Bear! My, you're out late tonight! That's the last time I'll be found snacking while observing, at least while outside of town..."

Jim presumably pays more attention to his surroundings at night now!

- *Mark Wagner (from the San Francisco Bay Area astronomers) shared the following tales:*

We've had coyotes, cattle, wild pigs, rattlesnakes, attack squirrels and threatening hummingbirds in the observing site."

Exactly how does an attack squirrel attack?" you ask. Read on:

The attack squirrel and the threatening hummingbird were part of a bad weekend that a fellow observer from Castro Valley California had at Fremont Peak a number of years ago. The observer's name is Dan, and after arriving began along telescope row toward a friend's camper. As he approached, the friend's Doberman Pincer, tethered to the camper, "leaped" at Dan, and latched onto his pant leg.... dog tether fully extended out. Lots of yelling, thrashing and dancing around, but no damage other than torn pants.

Later he began to set up his SCT. The tripod was put up, and as Dan was carefully setting the scope onto it, the attack-squirrel leapt out of nowhere (from Dan's perspective) landing right on the tripod! Scared the daylights out of Dan.

After he was done observing, Dan sacked out in his sleeping bag right on the ground next to his 'scope. The following morning, he was awakened by the sound of a loud, low flying "airplane". He opened his eyes and there, hovering inches above his nose was a very curious hummingbird. I'm sure you can imagine how startling that had to be.

I don't think I've seen Dan since!

You are probably thinking about sleeping in your vehicle as protection from such encounters. Mark Wagner's final story warns us that being sleepy in the dark presents mechanical risks, too.

We also had one observer, asleep in his truck, accidentally kick the gearshift into neutral (was sleeping in the cab of the truck), starting him on an uncontrolled ride down the mountainside. He thought it was an earthquake as he awakened in the cab. I had awakened in time to see the truck rolling out of the parking lot and heading toward the wooden guard-rail alongside the road out. Nobody was hurt, even though the truck became airborne stopping in a bunch of poison oak a couple hundred yards downhill (the occupant had actually been thrown clear when the truck launched into the air).

Talk about heart failure!

- *OK, now remember that firearms are prohibited at Anza while you read this next one:*

Allan Mayer reported, "I had a bobcat stalk me once in the middle of the Allegheny mountains once. I was by myself in the middle of nowhere, there wasn't a person around for miles. Anyone who has ever heard a bobcat SCREAM will never forget it! This pesky critter kept screaming, and getting closer. Knowing that they normally avoid humans at all costs made me a little worried... so I finally fired a shot over its head. That must have angered him, because he made even more noise and got within 10 yards of me. At that point I emptied the whole cylinder at him directly. He backed off to around 30 yards or so, but wouldn't go away. This is very unusual activity for a bobcat, definitely not normal behavior! Something was wrong here. I left, and the bobcat was still screaming.

Bob May offered an explanation for this curious behavior, but it probably didn't make Allan feel much better: "From the actions, I would say it was a female in heat. If she was hunting you, you'd never hear her." Oh, my.

Finally, if there was some sort of medal for presence of mind under extreme stress, it would go to the astronomer (whose name I've lost) who described the night that he was staring into his eyepiece, when he felt something rub against his ankle. Like a cat would, except he didn't have a cat. Luckily, he looked down before moving, and what he saw was a skunk, snuggling up to his leg! Several moments of frozen terror followed, with him standing like a statue and barely breathing. At long last, the skunk wandered off, and our intrepid astronomer nearly fainted from the sudden release of tension.

Happy stargazing, and remember, astronomers may be the top of the evolutionary tree, but we're not the only creature that inhabits the darkness!

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