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Eye on the Environment Living With Wildlife, From Syosset To The Swan

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It has been three months since I first arrived in the Swan Valley. Although in a three month span I could neither play a complete college football season nor could I properly train to run a marathon, in this time I have seen the seasons change from summer to fall to winter back to fall again and I have gained a new outlook about living in a community tightly woven into a raw, natural environment.

The 2,446 miles that separate my new home in Condon with my childhood home on Long Island, in New York, seem infinite when I consider the stark differences between the two locations.

Syosset, the town that I grew up in, mirrors that of any suburban portrait. While the town's name comes from a Native American word meaning "place of the pines," the expansive coniferous forest that once dominated the landscape has been abated by paved roads that wind themselves to strip malls, local businesses, and developments of well-manicured homes. It is a place where communities are detached from the wild environment that are walled behind words like, "Park" and "Preserve."

That being so, on Long Island, my experiences with wildlife were limited. I mostly encountered rabbits and Canada Geese with the rare glimpse of a deer or two. Thus, the increased occasion of running into deer, elk, raccoons, moose, mountain lions, coyotes, and bears was a notable difference.

A few weeks ago some visitors to the area came into the Swan Ecosystem Center where I work. They asked where they should go to see wildlife. My coworker smiled and responded, "My backyard." I had to laugh; it was true.

Here, one need not go out of his or her way to find wildlife. I wake in the morning to a herd of elk positioned outside my kitchen window and at night I fall asleep to the cry of coyotes that make their home nearby.

While I have relished the opportunity to live more intimately with wildlife, I have also been confronted by some of the challenges that are coupled with this reality. The 70 mph speed limit that had thrilled me when I first arrived became irrelevant after several near misses with deer and one with a wild turkey.

I have found myself "googleing" the phrase, "How to remove skunk odor," after my two dogs and I have each been sprayed on separate occasions. Even when jogging, I find myself spitefully cognizant of any number of predators that may be following in my wake.

The fact of living in bear country has had a major influence on me and has been an impetus to a wide range of emotions that I have faced since being here, the first, being fear. Upon arriving in the Swan Valley I was equipped with bear spray and a number of informational

pamphlets about how to avoid bears and what to do if one is encountered. I used this knowledge to make a series of irrational conclusions about bear threats that stretched far beyond a chance meeting on a trail or in a wooded area.

One memorable night I abruptly woke up, sweat soaked. My sleep had been interrupted by the sudden belief that I had left out an attractant that could lure any number of bears to my cabin. Earlier that evening I was confronted with the task of what to do with my overflowing bags of garbage – the lack of curbside garbage pick-up was another Condon novelty.

I had left the bags by the front door as inspiration for their removal. My angst was precipitated by visions of ambitious bears that had found their way into storage and garbage containers in an attempt to retrieve the odorous contents inside. I assumed that similarly, a bear would find its way through my padlocked front door to get to the garbage I had foolishly placed behind it. I reacted by moving the garbage bags to a counter top near a window.

About an hour or so later my sleep was again disturbed by the fear that a bear would see the bags from my window and then climb through it. It was not until I placed the bags into my bathtub behind a closed bathroom door that I was able to sleep soundly.

Fear later became curiosity, as I hoped to see a bear. I would think to myself, “so what if a bear is interested in my trash or my animal feed outside, as long as I can have a look from the safety of my cabin window.” However, it was not long before understanding replaced my curiosity. I realized that tips regarding bear

attractants were not designed for my own personal safety exclusively; preventing interactions between bears and people serves to protect bear populations as well.

That realization led me to a broader understanding about living in areas like the Swan Valley, where humans and nature interface. While the tree covered mountains that envelop a menagerie of lakes and creeks create an idyllic setting for residence, the realness of living here is not as uncomplicated as the scenery suggests. One’s actions have a direct impact on the wilderness of where he or she lives. Actions need to be accounted for and acknowledged from a full spectrum of perspectives.

Perceptive is exactly what I gained in regard to another wildlife reality in the Swan Valley, hunting. I will admit; with no direct exposure, my previous impression of hunting was almost entirely based on Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.”

I pictured big guns allied with even bigger egos. And while I still do not see myself picking up a 3.06 in the near future, I have come to admire the pride hunters take in being able to provide for themselves. I have distinguished the hunting culture as one grounded in need and discipline, rather than in blood.

Just today, I had the pleasure of speaking with a second- grade student who proudly showed off his camouflage jacket and pack. “Camouflage is good because it lets me hide from the animals and shoot them,” he said. As I began to shake my head while he positioned his arms forming the shape of a gun, the boy continued. “Then bam, it’s dead. Daddy and I go get it right away. We take really good care of it; we are ‘respecting’ it. It tastes

really good. I love animals.” It is moments like that, which shape my impressions of the Swan Valley.

It seems I am slowly getting a handle on living with wildlife and living in a rural milieu in general, but I am still no expert. Last week I found myself gearing up with bear spray when confronted with a rustling in the brush to the right of my trail. When a squirrel appeared and all but sauntered past me, I realized I still have a lot to learn.