

We can learn new lessons from nature's creatures



Highland Views
Chris Highland

Among John Muir's descriptions of growing up in Scotland and Wisconsin he relates a poignant story of a discovery he made one cold winter day in "The Story of My Boyhood and Youth" (1913).

Young John came upon the nest of a ground squirrel and found the small creature curled up and frozen solid in its nest. John carried it home and tried to warm it up by the fire as he had with a fish that was "hard as a bone" yet, thawed by the fireside, flopped all over the kitchen.

He had no luck with the squirrel. "Its life had passed away without the slightest struggle, as it lay asleep curled up like a ball, with its tail wrapped about it."

The compassionate naturalist reflects: "Most wild animals get into the world and out of it without being noticed."

I read those lines and looked away from the page, staring out the window into the tangled thicket of low trees near the house. Reflecting on the naturalist's words, I was once more reminded of a recurring question I ponder: What am I seeing? What am I not seeing?

Gazing into the trees at that moment,

my eyes focused on a rabbit, frozen, motionless and camouflaged, blending into the brown leaves of the season.

I smiled with wonder.

Are animals "put on earth for a reason"? Are wild creatures "created for humans to use" — for food, clothing, playthings or pets? If so, why would it be that most creatures "get into the world and out of it" without a single human ever seeing them?

I find that humbling.

The rabbit hunched down under the overgrowth (or over the undergrowth) lives and moves and has its being on the same land I live on, breathing the same air, enjoying (I assume) the same sun and grumbling (I imagine) at the same bone-chilling cold.

When I venture out into "her world" where the wild rules, I know I am "out there," outdoors, out-side — beyond the protective doors and walled "sides" within which humans huddle and hunker down, attempting to blend in with the landscape.

Of course, we're not really very good at that, are we? We could learn from the rabbits, squirrels and other teachers of the seasons.

This is precisely why we need more naturalists and fewer supernaturalists. We would do better to learn our life lessons from the furry, feathered and

finned neighbors we know next to nothing about. Because we know absolutely nothing about any other world.

Harvard entomologist E.O. Wilson has said we live on an "unknown planet." Let that sink in. We know very little about our own home or what's here, let alone any "there" that may or may not be out "there."

The bundled bunny seemed to be staring back at me, though I don't think she noticed me watching her. She appeared comfortably content.

Or maybe she was afraid — still and silent, sheltering beneath the branches near the house, protected from the hawk I saw swoop through the trees earlier.

Yet she appeared calm, resting on the leaves, almost napping, with large brown eyes open and alert.

Then a surprise. My wife Carol entered the room. As I slowly pointed out in the direction of the bunny, she whispered, "Oh look, there's another one!" Sure enough, turning my head just slightly I saw him (male or female? I'm guessing).

There was a sense of companionship between the outside and the inside. It took a new pair of eyes to notice what I had missed.

A young farm boy named John happens to notice a nest. Peeking in, he sees a frozen ball of fur. He takes it home and

tries to resurrect it. In the act of awareness — seeking to find, seeking to help — a lesson is learned. The boy feels a deeper relation to the wild near at hand, on his land, on the earth, in that season.

The squirrel rescuer went on to proclaim a new gospel of protecting the wilderness and the wild things — he made the inquisitive spirit both a science and an art. Close observation led him to closer relation. Curiosity became his spirituality.

Why save a squirrel? Why wonder what the rabbits are hiding from or if they're hiding at all? Why ponder the fact that we simply don't notice most of the inhabitants sharing our world?

It's helpful to welcome another pair of eyes. To see alongside them, then to be aware of other eyes looking back.

Alongside a curious and compassionate young boy named John Muir, we can value other sets of eyes, increase our sensitivity to what or who is there, learning new lessons from the Great Book of Nature, season by season.

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