

Strange encounters of the wildlife kind

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I was sitting by the pond in the woods on Sunday in the afternoon when my peripheral vision picked up something moving on my left about 60 feet away.

I didn't move my head as I shifted my eyes as far as I could in that direction. I caught a glimpse of a brown something, humping along like a super-sized inchworm. I first thought that it might be a long-tailed weasel. But as it came clear of the underbrush, I saw that it was just a common groundhog. Or woodchuck, or whistle-pig.

Thin as he was, I guessed that he had recently emerged from hibernation.

He, who I was pretty sure wasn't a she, glanced in my direction without comment. Normally groundhogs when they become aware of me run as fast as they can for their hole.

He took me either as a recently installed woodland sculpture or a lazy bear wearing a baseball cap loafing on a lawn chair in the warm sun.

He stopped at the pond outlet about 30 feet away, but didn't drink. He gave me the kind of long, x-ray look that girls now sue boys over. I didn't move, and I tried not to blink.

He rose on his hind legs, stood motionless and cocked his head at me. We looked each other in the eye. It was apparent that he recognized that I was animate, despite my best efforts to not be. We kept looking at each other. He did not whistle an alarm, and neither did I.

Groundhogs are not trophy wildlife like rhinos or sperm whales, both of which are not that common in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia. No one pays either to see groundhogs in the wild or swim with them, eyeball to eyeball.

In Virginia, the groundhog is considered a nuisance species and could be killed at any time except on Sundays, when, apparently, they attend services. The Legislature and Governor opened Sunday hunting this year on private land. Virginia does not allow me to trap and relocate a groundhog for reasons that are not self-evident.

Groundhogs are rodents in the *Sciuridae* family, which is part of the marmot group. I think I would feel differently about groundhogs if I considered them fancy-sounding marmots instead of icky-sounding, verminous rodents.

Groundhogs are agonistic in that they use a range of social behaviors from aggression, displays and fighting to placation and conciliation. A cornered groundhog will fight fiercely; a scared one will run for its life.

Around the farm, groundhogs are, indeed a nuisance, though I hope it's not intentional on their part. They like to burrow under foundations and concrete pads, causing them to crack and heave. Livestock can step into their holes, which can go as deep as five feet and be 25 feet long. Their burrows can break an axle or an ankle. They eat garden stuff that I grow, which I like to eat more than I like to grow it for groundhogs.

Our dogs have always tried to kill them on sight. Nellie, our Yellow Lab, eats them and then upchucks on the front porch to prove that she is a reliable guardian of our homestead security.

But here in the woods, the groundhog and I were not hostile. We were not friendly exactly, just civil and curious—strangers sharing a long, imagined bench in a public park.

I've had one other experience in extended communication with wildlife.

I was camping many years ago in the early fall when I was visited by a young, black bear at twilight as I was cooking burgers over a fire.

I had placed a container of hummus on an aluminum plate on a log about 10 feet away. When I glanced over, I saw the bear about the same distance from the plate on the opposite side. He twitched his nose; I twitched mine.

I wasn't about to be scared off after one exchange of twitching nostrils.

I guessed he was a yearling male about 150 pounds and, from his looks, well-fed. I was bigger, but his claws were longer and his teeth looked in better shape. I was pretty sure that I had a bigger brain, but it was hard to tell at that distance.

He pointed his nose at the log while scanning me as if to ask, "It's all right with you if I share, isn't it?"

No, it wasn't. So, looking him in the eye, I rose slowly, took one small step toward the plate and stopped.

The bear snuffed at me, took one step toward the plate and stopped.

So I took a second small step toward the plate and stopped.

The bear took a second step toward the plate and stopped.

So I took a third small step toward the plate and stopped.

The bear took one more step toward the plate and stopped.

Neither of us had broken eye contact.

I decided to use my bigger brain. "That is *my* hummus," I said, using my most authorial voice, which I hoped sounded like his mother.

Since I had paid for the hummus and packed it in, I felt that my food was more mine than his under any system of laws I could think of. He seemed to be operating on the principle of finders, eaters.

The bear startled at the sound of my voice, but didn't move.

If each of us took two more steps, we would be within swatting distance of each other's nose, with the prize between us. So how much was eight ounces of hummus worth to me?

Of course, I felt I was upholding principle as well. It did not appear that this bear shared my deep love for English common law and American jurisprudence. He appeared entirely comfortable being a pirate in the high mountains of New Hampshire.

Then I recalled something about animals interpreting eye-to-eye staring as an aggressive challenge. So I looked off to the side without turning my head.

We stayed that way for several minutes.

It finally occurred to me that I needed to think outside the box of baleful staring at him or not at him.

I started talking in a low-but-firm voice while I moved sideways but gradually in the direction of the plate while I kicked some rocks and sticks off to the side as I started clapping.

He looked from my hands to my voice to the skittering stones to the plate on the log. In his confusion, he lost his focus on what we both wanted.

I picked up the hummus container in one hand and with the other started banging the metal plate against my belt buckle.

What kind of maniacal wood sculpture is this? he must have wondered. Me, too.

Like Sonny Liston, Mr. Bear soon had enough of some crazy-acting fool who might do anything. He turned on his heels, stuck his butt in the air and galloped into the woods.

Later that night, he climbed the tree where I'd hung my backpack from an inch-thick limb and made off in silence with pancake fixings, butter, trail mix and chocolate bars. Somehow he bent the limb down from above without breaking it.

At least he didn't get the hummus.

The only thing, I thought, this groundhog might value as much as that bear valued hummus was my unsmoked cigar.

"This is *my* cigar," I said.

He stood straighter and looked at me harder, but he didn't move.

"It's not much good for eating, but if you come over here, I'll give you a puff." So I took out my lighter and clicked up a flame. A fire-flicking dragon that puffed smoke and talked was too much for Mr. Groundhog.

Robert Frost in his 1936 poem, "A Drumlin Woodchuck," compared his own life and dwelling to those of a groundhog where he promises his "dear" that he will be there for her for another day, even another year, after the hunt has gone past. It reads, in part:

It will be because, though small
As measured against All,
I have been so instinctively thorough
About my crevice and burrow.

Frost, like Thoreau before him, needed to find a protected hole from which to observe and make occasional forays for sustenance.

The groundhog and I have a lot in common, a fact that I should keep under wraps in the Commonwealth of Virginia, and now on Sundays.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books - **-Maple-leaf Rags, Snowy Mountain Breakdown, Blue Grass Notes** and **Land Matters** -- are available through his website. He writes for www.RoelResouces.com and bimonthly for BackHome Magazine.

Use and Payment:

This original column may be reprinted or posted on websites for one-time use under the following payment schedule and terms. It may not be resold. Payment per column:

News services and magazines.....	\$50
Print weeklies and nonprofits....	\$10
Print dailies, brokers, developers, online buy/sell sites, blogs, newsletters...	\$15

Author credit above should be included at the end of each column. Editing for length is permitted. Copyright remains with Curtis Seltzer and applies to the column's use.

Send checks to Curtis Seltzer, 1467 Wimer Mountain Road, Blue Grass, VA 24413.

All archived columns may be purchased for \$10 each, 60 days after the release date. They are posted at www.curtis-seltzer.com, click on Country Real Estate. Contact me for orders, and I will provide them by email.

Reporters and publications may obtain a complimentary review copy of my books by emailing a request to curtisseltzer@htcnet.org; include a physical address.