

Scott's Beaver

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During our trip to Yellowstone the boys kept a list of all the animals we saw. It was a long one and if you ask my youngest son, Scott, his favorite, he will tell you it is “the beavers.” For most of the millions of visitors to Yellowstone, myself included, the trip is a chance to see all that charismatic megafauna, but to Scott it is the “chubby ones” that get him out of the car.

On our last night we were working our way through Hayden Valley, stopping at each pullout to search for wildlife. Big brother, Zack, would jump out of the car, scope in hand, and glean information from the other watchers to find out what was out there. Meanwhile, Scott would take a look around, watch for a few minutes, and go back to the car to read *Warriors*, a series of books about wild cats that talk. It was near sunset when we pulled over one last time.

Right outside the car window was a beaver eating grass. It was so close we could hear it chewing. The boys both watched, face to glass. Scott pleaded to let him out. After about ten minutes the beaver made its way to the edge of the Yellowstone River, just beyond our sight.

I released Scott from the car to follow. The beaver had stopped on the river bank and was just sitting there. Scott stopped as well and squatted down to watch. Another beaver swam up and they started grooming each other's butts. Zack joined Scott and they sat mesmerized and giggling. To a nine and twelve year old it was about the funniest thing ever.

Eventually the beavers swam downstream and Scott raced after them. I raced after Scott. They stopped, Scott stopped, which gave me a chance to catch up. We watched in silence as the beavers just sat there. After a few minutes, I told Scott we had to go. His response was an emphatic, “I not am leaving.”

I tried a couple more times, but eventually gave up. We kept watching as darkness fell.

The last time I was in Hayden Valley was just after my 13th birthday and it was the reverse situation. I was studying two otters playing in the river, being the wildlife biologist I dreamed of becoming, when my parents finally dragged me away, ruining my scientific observations. My resentment had not completely faded, but I now realized it was time to let that one go. One gift of parenthood is a greater understanding of one's own parents, both the things that they did and did not do. Zack and my father were waiting by the car. My father must have loved the irony as I tried to get Scott to leave so we could return to the lodge.

“It is not fair, how come you let Zack stay out longer when he was looking for a wolf?” Two nights earlier, Zack asked me to pull over as we left the Lamar Valley so he could pee. I am

pretty sure the main reason was to get a couple extra minutes to watch for a wolf. Fairness is a constant complaint of a younger brother. He has no idea how much it bothered me to interrupt his time outdoors for some practical reason, like bedtime. My parenting dilemma ended when the beavers swam away.

When Scott is interested in an animal it is not as a scientist. The animal, whatever it is, becomes Scott's friend. He talks to them, laughs with them, holds them if he can. Scott believes that animals want to be held. It has been this way ever since he began catching and holding the pill bugs we found under rotten logs. While some were sacrificed to Scott's less than delicate three year old fingers, their deaths were not in vain. They helped Scott's connections with the non-human world become apparent and real. Now he is an expert at catching frogs, toads, and salamanders. After holding his amphibian friends, Scott will kiss them goodbye, though recently he stopped because, as he told me, "It must scare the animals to see a giant mouth coming towards them." It is a fine line between holding and hurting, but it is this closeness that builds relationships.

When Scott tells me "the beaver will miss me, he is my friend" who am I to argue? Scott's awareness of the small creatures brings him constant opportunity to know he is connected to a bigger world. He does not reserve his awe for only the big wildlife like so many others. To Scott it is not about some mystical connection, it is just about having fun with your friends.

Yellowstone is a bonanza of biophilia. The proof is seen in the traffic jams and confirmed everyday by millions of visitors. The theory of biophilia was first developed by E.O. Wilson. He defined it as the "innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms."¹ Wilson believes that there is a genetic basis that is universal to all humans. Biophilia is part of what makes us human beings and without it we are something else. That means we need contact with the more than human world to continue being human. I love the concept. Who can argue with the genetic destiny to be outdoors with the boys?

With less and less direct contact with the wonder and beauty of the natural world, separation grows between us and all the rest. As our contact with the living has diminished we have become apathetic towards other lives and, even worse, are at war with many of them. Biophobia has become who we are instead of biophilia. We evolved outdoors but have now moved inside. My fear is that we are evolving away from positive aspects of biophilia as we distance ourselves from the more than human world. With our exposure to wild nature becoming less and less, we are becoming something other than human beings. Instead of focusing on the animate, we are all about the inanimate. Our relationship with phones and

¹ E.O. Wilson, *In Search of Nature* (Washington, DC: Island Books, 1996), 165.

computers has replaced our connections to the plants and animals.

My plan is to take advantage of these pre-adolescent years. Right now Zack wants to be a wildlife photographer and Scott has the patience of a lion when he is stalking a frog. As the boys grow older there will be even more pressure to give them opportunities for contact with wild nature. Desperation would not be too strong a word to describe my efforts to be sure that they will have as many outdoor experiences as possible. I have and will plot for time to make it happen. To strengthen biophilia one doesn't have to visit Yellowstone. It can happen in small places where the charismatic fauna is a frog or salamander or ant. It could be a backyard, park, under a log, at the edge of a pond. The only requirement is that it has to be outdoors.

I worry about them growing out of a focus on the animate. What will happen when they become teenagers and life expands to push out time outdoors and encounters with nature beyond humans? If their careers take them inside an office building, they must have a cemented base of experiences that is part of their lives no matter what path they take. I want them to have a foundation that lasts for a lifetime so that by realizing they are part of something bigger their wonder and understanding will increase.

Hopefully when Zack and Scott have families of their own, we will all go to Yellowstone. However, if the spell of the inanimate captures Zack and Scott, I will just have to take my grandchildren without them. Hopefully, I have done my job. At the very least, when Zack and Scott look out their office window and a flock of blackbirds swirls in the sky or a squirrel jumps from one tree to another, they will pause and marvel.