
DOWN TO EARTH

by ALAN DEVOE



NOT IN THE BOOKS

SOME of the most curious, interesting and suggestive events that occur (or are said to occur) in the fields and the woods are events that never gain admission to the textbooks of natural history. Instead, they remain the stuff of stories that pass from farmer to fisherman, hunter to trapper. They are a part of the lore of outdoorsmen, but they are excluded from the chronicles of science.

Some of them are excluded, as any scientist would quickly and coldly insist, because they are patently myths. Others are omitted from the textbooks for the less compelling reason that they have been observed and are attested only by persons who are not formal or technical scientists, and who presumably therefore — according to the canon of a prevalent sort of scientific snobbery — are not competent as observers or reliable as reporters. And then there is a third category of outdoor events which are omitted from the textbooks, ap-

parently, simply because they are not the kind of events which interest or excite the kind of people who prepare natural history texts. Thus it is possible to look up the subject of wolves, say, in a dozen good volumes of mammalogy, and learn every imaginable detail of wolves' anatomy, diet, range, variant coloration, weight, dentition and economic significance, without ever finding any reference to the eerie canniness with which wolves sometimes secure their prey by teamwork. The teamwork hunting-techniques of wolves — or of keen dogs, for that matter — are an immensely exciting thing for all of us who respond to animals with a sense of their living animality; and the attempt to enter into the mind of a wolf, and realize something of what is occurring there when the beast engages with other wolves in the staging of an ambush, is enough to start a man speculating fascinatedly upon the whole huge problem of consciousness and its degrees and kinds. But a man might read a dozen textbooks and never

hear of wolf-teamwork at all. Its description and discussion have largely been left to such frowned-on popularizers as the late Ernest Thompson Seton and Enos Mills.

There could be written an engrossing book devoted to all the asserted animal behaviors and wildlife-events which the standard scientific works on animal life omit. A naturalist without other demands upon his time might profitably devote his career to investigating personally, one by one, the whole long list of trappers' tales and hunters' allegations, testing at first-hand which ones are true and which ones are only notions, and then preparing a book which would thicken-out and vivify the portraits of individual animals in a way the textbooks forever fail to do. Does a wily rat, or a raccoon or any other animal, ever spring a trap with a stick? There are plenty of trappers to say confidently, and as a personal observation, that it happens. There are plenty of scientists, vastly learned in the laboratory science and theory of psychology, to deny it. The textbooks remain silent, not mentioning the matter even to refute it, and our life-portraits of rat and raccoon are by that much the thinner and less alive. Do squirrels ever cross water by using leaves or bits of bark as rafts? Do foxes ever "play" possum? How about the story of a buck deer protectively confusing the trail of doe or fawns? Events like these — if in fact they are events, and not just campfire yarnings — want looking into.

The naturalist who can devote a lifetime to investigating, with an altogether unprejudiced mind, these abundant extra-textbook items of nature-lore, will likely find that most of the "whoppers" are whoppers indeed: the merest folk-myth, the merest inventions of lonely hunters' and trappers' imaginations. Even so, it will be a service to have achieved the tales' definitive refutation. More valuably, it will incontestably be found that some of the alleged events are real and some of the stories true.

I say it will incontestably be found. I say so with sureness because, though I cannot give my lifetime to investigation of all the stories, I do give my lifetime to intensive watching of the particular wild creatures that occur on the particular hundred-odd acres of mountain and woods and brook and meadows that are my own living laboratory; and I know of my own knowledge that wild creatures do many things that are not to be found recited in the reference-works; and that they do some of the things, at least, that woodsmen and countrymen have long said they do, all skeptical criticism notwithstanding.

This department of the *MERCURY* is customarily written with the kind of disembodied formality that omits the first personal pronoun. In fact, however, it is of course largely a personal record. When it is written, "The woodchuck does thus-and-such," the words are only an alteration, for publication, of "The woodchuck that lived in my buckwheat field last year

did thus-and-such, and so did the woodchuck over by the big shagbark hickory." When it is written, "The weasel pursues its prey implacably," the statement sums up and stands upon what I have seen of weasels over the years, as I have watched them loping over this or that part of my snowy acreage. This month I write directly in the first person, for it is the only way to tell the two small stories I want to tell. They are stories about two nature-events of the kind that are "not in the books."

II

The first story concerns a white-footed mouse, the little tawny-backed deer-mouse that is one of our commonest mammals. White-Foot, in the winter, frequently makes his way into the deep, earth-floored cellar of our old farmhouse. By midwinter the mice have often lost much of their shyness. I can watch a White-Foot sitting on one of the cellar storage-shelves, preening his whiskers.

I was watching one, on a day a few winters back, as he investigated some jars and jugs and boxes of nails and the like. He came presently upon a small loosely stoppered jug of very old molasses. (Why this had been preserved need not be explained; it has to do with making a peculiar brew with which big moths are lured on summer nights.) A brief and expert tussle with the cork fetched it loose for White-Foot. He peered; he sniffed; he was delighted. A mouse cannot reach far enough down inside

a jug-neck to get at the contents. No. But he has his methods. White-Foot mounted the jug-neck, inserted the tip of his tail into it, and sat down. Rising, he hauled up a tail-load of molasses as efficiently as a man hauling a bucket up out of a well.

That is the first story. In a recent book of mine I incorporated the fact that a white-footed mouse employs this curious and entertaining technique. Promptly came a letter from a sardonic reader. Where on earth, he wondered, had I dug up *that* picturesque bit of fable?

I could but reply, with simple gravity and truth, that I had dug it up in my cellar.

The second story I want to tell is about a deer. The thing happened in hunting-season three autumns ago. I had heard shots, over across the mountain, and then presently shouts and callings; and I stood still in a small clearing, surmising that a buck was being hunted (inefficiently), and hoping to have a look at him should he come over the line onto my protected land. I had my look.

He was a small buck, and had just been trivially grazed in the shoulder, but he was winded and heaving and thoroughly done-up when he burst lumberingly right into the clearing where I stood. He came out of the woods perhaps 30 feet from me. We looked at one another. Over the hill the idiotic din of shouting was loud in the ears of both of us.

Slowly but unhesitatingly the panting buck walked toward me. He

came closer, closer, until he was so near by my side that I could touch him. Very gradually and gently I raised my hand. I laid it on the buck's heaving shoulder. I could feel him shudder and tremble for an instant at the touch, but then he grew quiet and relaxed. He was safe.

We stood like that for what I suppose was in fact only two or three minutes, though it seemed longer; and then the buck glanced at me, gave a kind of little preliminary start, and then went bounding away across the clearing and into the woods on the other side and out of my ken forever.

III

The queer and comical proficiency of a white-footed mouse with his tail is not mentioned in any of the hundred or so textbooks of animal life that stand on my shelves. Possibly the matter is omitted because it is thought trivial, and less important to an understanding of White-Foot's life than a set of statistics about his teeth. More likely — as I take it from my correspondent's withering letter — it is one of those bits of animal lore that was dismissed years ago as a mere myth, a mere countryman's taradiddle, like the squirrel's floating on a bark-chip and the 'coon's springing a trap with a twig. I am moved again to think of what a richness our animal-knowledge may be missing, until some naturalist, patient and unprejudiced, shall have a life to give to

investigating all these unscientific items of animal lore, one by one, and shall prepare a book of his findings. Do squirrels ever float on bark-chips? I do not know. It seems very unlikely; and the volumes of mammalogy do not allude to it. But I know something improbable that a white-footed mouse can do; and it is not in the books.

Back when I was a boy, there was a great spate in this country of sentimental nature-writing: the work of romantics dreaming dreams of the Golden Age, writing idylls of the Natural Man, sighing for Eden. In these books there recurred again and again the notion that animals, even very shy ones, when in great pain or fear or trouble, would sometimes come for help or sanctuary to man. It was a queerly lovely notion. My earliest instructors in science smashed it briskly. I had not thought of it again for many, many years. Not until three autumns ago, when I learned, from a spent buck deer, that the notion has not merely a sentimental attraction but has the merit of being true.

That a deer may do so strange and thought-provoking a thing is at least as worth mentioning in our natural histories of the deer, surely, as the details of how antlers develop. It is not merely an emotion-touching piece of lore, relevant to the origins of our great racial legends. It is an arresting piece of plain natural history. It is not in the books.

THE FARCE OF HONORARY DEGREES

BY ADOLPH E. MEYER

NEARLY three hundred years ago, Harvard College conferred an S.T.D. (Doctor of Sacred Theology) upon its president, Increase Mather. In so doing the College not only paid fitting homage to Mather's proficiency as a devil-chaser, but also inaugurated in America the practice of adorning the illustrious great with honorary degrees. Since then the great mills of learning have converted many battalions of Americans into Doctors of glittering titles: saintly S.T.D.s and D.D.s, learned L.H.D.s and Litt.D.s, judicial D.C.L.s and LL.D.s. On occasions when the feats of the honored have been so dazzling that even the lofty LL.D. seemed a puny tribute, the colleges have met the emergency by inventing a batch of superfine, custom-built degrees. Pennsylvania Military College, for example, hailed the splendor of baseball's Connie Mack with a D.P.E. (Doctor of Physical Education); Oglethorpe University perceived in William Green of the AFL all the qualities that go into a D.P.S. (Doctor of Public Service); and Beaver College of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, outdid all precedent in saluting Admiral Byrd as a D.F.F.

(Doctor of Faith and Fortitude).

Of all the accolades distributed every year by the higher learning it is the LL.D., the *Legum Doctor*, which is the most prized. The dream of every aspiring congressman and bank president in the land, it is the hallmark of a man of parts. Henry Ford, Owen D. Young, John D. Rockefeller, Westbrook Pegler, J. Edgar Hoover, Grover Aloysius Whalen, Bernard Baruch, Raymond Gram Swing, Lowell Thomas, George Fisher Baker, Jr., William Randolph Hearst, James Aloysius Farley, Thomas William Lamont, Robert Rutherford McCormick, Governor Thomas Edmund Dewey, the Reverend Charles Coughlin — all these were named Doctors of Law.

A right-thinking man like Senator Robert Alphonso Taft quite naturally has not one but several LL.D.s, whereas characters like Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Chester Bowles have none at all. Over such pillars of normalcy as the late Messrs. Harding, Coolidge, Charles Schwab, Andrew Mellon and Elbert Gary, LL.D.s were poured by the barrel. The colleges are quick to smell sub-

ADOLPH E. MEYER, associate professor of education at New York University, is a veteran contributor to the *MERCURY*. His latest book is *Voltaire: Man of Justice*.