

Members only

BY TOM DICKSON

One of my most exciting deer hunts took place while I was sleeping.

It was during a warm, early November afternoon near Cascade. I'd settled in behind a downed cottonwood with two deer antlers in the hopes of "rattling" in a deer. The idea is to bang the antlers together to mimic the sound of battling bucks to lure a real deer within bow or gun range.

I rattled on and off for about 15 minutes and then, as so often happens to me in the woods when the sun is shining and nothing's happening, I fell asleep. I'm not sure for how long—maybe half an hour—but when I woke and sat up, a massive 5x5 whitetail stood staring at me from about 60 yards away. As soon as he realized what I was, he spun around and was gone.

While kicking myself for the catnap, I still couldn't help but marvel at what had just happened. I'd tried rattling many times before. This was the first time it actually worked!

Bringing wildlife in close is a thrilling way to experience nature. After much practice, I've learned to call in wild turkeys, ducks,

and Canada geese. Using the classic red birchwood-and-pewter Audubon bird call, I've also attracted juncoes, titmouses, and other songbirds, just to see them.

And of course, that's entirely the appeal of angling. I toss a fly or lure in the water hoping a fish views my offering as the real deal. Then the two of us connect, via the line.

Duping a critter doesn't happen with every attempt; usually animals ignore my entreaties. But when it does occur, the moment can be mesmerizing. It creates a sense of fully entering the natural world, even if just for a moment.

I suspect that these encounters tap into a primordial past. For hundreds of thousands of years, our ancestors more or less co-existed with other animals. We were just another creature roaming the plains, as close to nature as any bison or cheetah.

These days, nature wants nothing to do with us. As we stumble through the forest, animals flee at our approach while pine squirrel activate their alarm systems. We try moving slowly, stepping around twigs, wearing muted colors. It doesn't help; we know we're perceived as a menace, a threat.

For many of us, the natural world has become the most exclusive club in the world, one that no person, no matter how rich or prestigious, can fully enter. When we call to animals and they respond, it feels as if nature briefly

opens that door and whispers, "Hey, you're part of us. Welcome back."

Bowhunters and nature photographers come closest to gaining membership. The best are stealthy, camouflaged head to foot, bodies and clothing disinfected with scent-erasing soap. Bowhunters often stalk their prey in slow motion, taking one careful step at a time until they experience what *Field & Stream* columnist Bill Heavey calls "the strange thrill of being undetected inside a wild animal's bubble of awareness."

It's one thing to sneak up on animals undetected. It's a wholly different thrill to break the silence with a turkey gobble or antler rattle to convince a wild animal to come toward you. My heart pounds whenever a distant duck turns to investigate my soft quacks. Or a tom turkey struts toward my lovelorn hen call, me shaking so much I can't hold the shotgun steady.

As for bugling in a 700-pound bull to within 30 yards? I'd probably pass out.

There are places where animals allow people to come close—often dangerously close. Some national parks, like Yellowstone, for instance. Because they aren't hunted, the animals there move about seemingly unbothered by crowds of visitors. I can understand the appeal, and have enjoyed watching wildlife there myself.

Yet there's something about Yellowstone that makes me uneasy. Some consider the park an Eden, a peaceable kingdom where animals and people coexist. But too often the animals' lack of fear leads to unnatural encounters with people. Except for the occasional feeder-habituated songbird or curious fox kit, wildlife should be skittish around humans and other predators. It's a trait they need to survive.

Groucho Marx once said, "I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." I feel that way about zoolike settings where nature is a bit too comfortable with our presence. There's something deep within me that would love to be fully accepted into the natural world. But if I ever were allowed in for more than a few moments, I'd have to leave. My very presence would prove it wasn't the club I thought it was after all. 

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