

Things That Go Bump In The Night
Jay Reynolds Freeman

On the astronomy mailing lists that I frequent, there are sometimes threads about encounters with dangerous animals while observing alone, or about fears of such encounters. The enlightened consensus usually seems to be that the most dangerous animals one is likely to encounter while observing are stupid or malicious human beings. I agree, and I urge you to take this prospect under serious consideration before you decide to set up a telescope in some remote and solitary place. Notwithstanding, contributors often post humorous or otherwise entertaining anecdotes about their own encounters with animals in the wild. I have several of those myself, and I thought I would write them up.

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Probably the silliest such involved a skunk. I was observing by myself at Fremont Peak -- a well-known observing site in the California central coast area. I had set up my C-14 on the border of a dirt road that had been carved into a rather steeply sloped south-facing hillside, with a good view of sky south of the zenith. The cut had left a near-vertical earth surface four or five feet high on the north, uphill side of the road itself.

After I had been observing for an hour or two, I heard a noise nearby, and noticed a skunk grubbing in that exposed vertical surface, about ten meters off, no doubt looking for something tasty to eat. As I shined my flashlight beam on the little animal, it stared back at me calmly. After a moment's thought, I decided that the right thing to do was nothing at all. I turned off the light and went back to the eyepiece. During the next several hours, the skunk worked the embankment for goodies while I worked the sky for galaxies. From time to time, I would pause and look at the skunk, who would similarly pause and look at me, but each of us always decided that the other was conducting legitimate and non-conflicting business, and in any case appeared not to be a threat, and so was not worth bothering about.

I have had far worse human company at star parties.

The trouble with skunks is, that they expect us to be rational.

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There used to be a red fox resident near the Bumpas Hell parking lot at Lassen National Park, who was thoroughly habituated to humans and

well aware that we were reliable sources of handouts and steal-able edibles. I once surprised him half way into my astronomy van -- which contained considerable amounts of the latter. His hind feet were still on the ground, but his forefeet were on the floor of the van, just inside the side door. He had the most accusing look on his face as I chased him off.

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Another time at Bumpas, I had my C-14 set up a fair way from my car -- this time a Geo Metro. I thought I was safe from furry beggars because I had not brought anything to eat along with me. But I had forgotten that the definition of "edible" is a matter of, er, taste. When I walked back to the car for some reason, as I approached the open back hatch I heard unmistakable rustling noises emanating from the litter bag I kept by the shifter. I cautiously closed the back hatch, then very cautiously opened the side door, and still more cautiously investigated. Peering out from beneath the piled detritus of tissues, credit card receipts, and wrappers from fast food and candy bars were two small shiny eyes. It was a weasel! I -- the Deep-Sky Weasel -- had at last met my namesake. I left the door open and let the little creature rummage to its heart's content.

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Once I was attending an observing session at the remote home of a fellow amateur astronomer who lived in the Sierra foothills. I had planned an early arrival, and had permission from the hostess to open the gate and set up even if no one was there: She said that she and her husband might be in town, at dinner, when I arrived.

So I did. I found a nice site in an area clear of trees, unpacked my 6-inch Maksutov, and set to work. From time to time I heard occasional rustlings or scuttling noises in the woods, but ignored them. Not till my hosts had returned did I recall that the name of the township in whose near-wild outskirts they lived was "Bear Valley". On asking how when anyone had last seen a bear in the area, I was told "Yesterday." Hmn.

Later still I learned that her husband, whom I had not previously met, had been rather startled by the stranger -- me -- that he found on their property as they walked back up the road, and had been tempted to unholster his sidearm in case of necessity. Perhaps I should not have greeted my hostess by putting my flashlight under my chin, beam pointing upward, and saying "I am the ghost of James Lick".

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Speaking of which, it isn't really an animal story, but on the subject of fears of encounters with non-humans, James Lick, the founder and first funder of Lick Observatory, lies in a tomb at the base of the pier of the Lick 36-inch refractor. There is always a dim light there, and a bouquet of flowers -- I fear artificial ones -- in front of the tomb. Visitors to the observatory can usually get a glimpse of the area, particularly if they are walking up or down the staircase that leads up the side of the dome from floor level of the main observatory building, to allow access to the vertically-movable dome floor.

As an occasional docent at Lick's summer programs, I always try to point out that the tomb is there, and remark that if Lick should show up and ask for a view through a telescope, we would all be greatly honored to give him one. And as visitors are filing into the dome for a view, I take great care to tell kids that so far this evening, more people have gone into the dome than have come out ...

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I have never seen a mountain lion while observing, though I did once see a wild mountain lion in the arboretum of U. C. Santa Cruz. While driving down the road from Fremont Peak one night, though, I came around a bend and got a flash in my headlights of something leaping nearly vertically up an embankment at the side of the road. That might have been a mountain lion. And on another occasion in the same area, I spotted something odd-looking while driving up the road in late afternoon, and on stopping to investigate, I found most of a dead wild pig -- the rest having been eaten. The corpse was very fresh. I returned to my van and continued up the road, to observe.

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Wild pigs in that area are rather impressive in their own right. Big ones mass more than 200 kilograms.

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Other animals of interest that I have seen while driving up or down remote roads to observing sites include bobcat, gray fox, and coyote.

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Coyotes are a bit too small to pose much of a threat to humans (though beware of a rabid one, or of a mother protecting pups). Yet I

do have a funny coyote story. I was setting up to observe in the hills above Palo Alto, and as the dusk deepened, the local coyotes started howling in chorus. (One of the native American names for this animal is "song dog", and it is well deserved.) After listening to this continuing and beautiful serenade for some minutes, I decided to try howling back.

Immediately, there was dead silence from all the coyotes. How mortifying!

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I recall an internet discussion years ago in which an amateur astronomer from eastern central Africa mentioned that at some of the places where he liked to set up, there was a possibility of encountering African lions.

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It used to be that when I got uneasy observing alone, I would turn on my flashlight and turn around slowly, sweeping the beam against the ground in all directions, looking for eyes in the underbrush, staring back at me.

Then one night I actually did see eyes staring back. Their owner was hidden in brush -- I could see the eyes reflecting brightly, but the glare of the flashlight beam off leaves prevented me from seeing any more of the animal.

After a few moments of rather agitated thought, I turned the flashlight off and went back to observing.

The eyes weren't very far off the ground, and weren't very far apart: The critter was probably just one of the local resident gray foxes -- this was again at Fremont peak.

Probably ...

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I should mention in passing that I am the sole hypothecator of _Velociraptor_holocenus_borealis_ -- the Northern Contemporary Velociraptor -- a man-sized, ferocious, intelligent, aggressive top predator that is always hungry and is particularly fond of the flesh of human beings, that magically transmogrifies into a deer while illuminated by artificial light.

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And before I close, let me mention in passing the scariest anecdote I know of involving amateur astronomers and predators of the human kind. In the late 1970s or early 1980s, an observer who had occasionally set up at various places in southern Marin County (California), reported to his dismay that he had just found out that one of his favorite sites was only a few hundred meters away from a location where a notorious serial killer of the era had dumped the bodies of some of his victims.

Clear sky,

Jay Reynolds Freeman, Deep-Sky Weasel