

Animal Instincts

*Albertans owe a great deal to the wild and domestic animals of our province.
Still, it would seem, we have plenty to learn.*

BY FRED STENSON

The idea that we have a great deal to learn from animals is not new. *Aesop's Fables* suggests otherwise. But maybe, as Albertans, we have never properly considered what we have learned, or could learn, from the wild and domestic animals of our own bio-region.

Some examples: the skunk teaches us the survival value of being unpopular; the mountain goat and the eagle illustrate the advantage of preferring to live where no one else can; the meadowlark proves that you don't have to be good-looking to sing; the coyote beside the gopher hole knows what the parking cop knows — that you can profit by waiting for something to pop up; human teenagers and certain birds like the magpie and the ruffed grouse show dominance and provide a deceptive target by dressing to appear larger than they are.

The list goes on. Pigs face their pursuers and so cannot be chased. Furthermore, they are not overly worried about methane in their environment. When a beaver dams a river, it's for a good reason. It's



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also not permanent. Nor does the beaver tell you he or she has created a recreational paradise.

In the case of certain other animals, the inspirational value is not so obvious, but still well worth considering. Ravens, for example, are extremely wary. When they find a carcass, they do not eat it. They go and inform a whole bunch of other ravens and direct them back to the food source, in hopes that another

raven will jump on the carcass first, thus revealing if it is really a carcass or a predator pretending to be a carcass. What I glean from this is that Ontario does not function on raven logic. The Klein government was in power for years and Ontario went ahead and elected Mike Harris anyway.

Another animal to consider is the horse. The modern way of befriending a horse is to emulate the horse's behaviour. For example, on the early approaches, modern horse fanciers shuffle up sideways with their shoulders drooped and their eyes downcast. They slowly extend a hand and hold it well short of the horse they're meeting. They let

the horse sniff them and they withdraw the hand before the horse has time to pull away. Just think, if Bill Clinton had employed just a little horse sense in his encounters with women . . .

The grizzly bear is a very interesting case in that many people who probably think they are imitating grizzlies are in fact imitating a bogus concept of a grizzly. A few months back at a Calgary event called the

Bears' Jubilee, one of the speakers talked of Bart, the veteran movie grizzly. Bart has more screen credits than Sigourney Weaver and most of what he's called on to do is stand on his hind legs and roar. The bear expert said this is far from typical grizzly behaviour and, hence, reflects badly and unfairly on the animal.

So if you know people who are always getting up on their hind legs and roaring at everyone, in the belief that they are grizzlies, tell them they've got it all wrong. If they want to be a grizzly, they should keep quiet, grow their fingernails, and learn to dig roots. If they really must roar, then save it for the movies, and tell them to make sure their trainer gives them a cookie each time they do.

Also out there in the world of Alberta's animals are behaviours

that probably no one is emulating, but that perhaps we should consider. I am thinking of the cow. In times of distress, when they are in pain or someone is trying to get them to do something they see no point in, the cow will suddenly glaze over, lie down and become insensible. This, it seems to me, would come in darn handy at times, like your second hour in the line-up at the employment insurance office, or in the third hour of an Italian movie you've been assured is a classic, or when a business meeting goes on so long that people have forgotten what was said at the start and have begun to repeat it. Why not just glaze over, lie down and become insensible? Don't have a cow. Be a cow.

Given all the things that animals have shown us how to do,

I think it's time we did something for them. I have a proposition in mind that could fund green corridors between isolated bear habitats or, if that seems too grand, maybe the proceeds could go toward piped-in music for chicken factories. The concept begins with people in government, business and industry recognizing that certain of their behaviours were first modeled in the animal world. When they profit by these behaviours, maybe they should remit a royalty to the animal concerned.

I have already mentioned the parking attendant who might owe a debt to the hunting coyote. Then there's the badger who has perfected the art of waiting while smaller entities establish themselves in a new area. When the smaller entities (gophers) have their network and system of communication in place, the badger digs them out, eats them and lives in their houses.

According to Dr. Steve West, privatization is the reverse of that — small entities taking over the homes of large entities. While that may be possible in Alberta, I doubt it is possible in nature. The cougar, meanwhile, was the first master of the hostile takeover.

Finally, are there any Alberta animals from whom we can hope to learn nothing? I'm afraid the gopher comes to mind. In the spring, all the young males jump from their wintering holes and, with nothing but procreation on their minds, they race across the land: across summerfallow fields where they stand out like beacons, across highways where their entire fate depends on whether they're bobbing or scooting as a car passes over. Soon, the sad evidence of their failure lies everywhere. There is nothing we can learn from the gopher. The gopher probably learned it from us. 