

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Nature's Irony

by David Nelson

Some people are born with athletic skills, others with musical ability. Me? I was born with an innate love of nature.

Although I had a number of disparate interests as a child, my penchant for wildlife, whether observation or interaction, far outweighed all others. Many afternoons, a friend and I would wade in a stream to catch crayfish that we'd sell for bass bait. Other days I'd spend flipping rocks to see what lived underneath, watching birds, or catching salamanders to put in a terrarium. Like a bird dog on point, I wasn't about to let anything sway my attention. It seems my favorite avocation was predetermined.

At an early age, I trained a fox squirrel to eat from my hand. Eventually, "Squeaky" would bang on the screen door of our Iowa home to let us know she wanted a handout. Later, a photo in *Ranger Rick* magazine showed me that people could train birds to do the same; eat from their hands, that is. If they could do it, so could I. And so I did.

Everywhere I've lived, including my current rural Albany County residence, I've trained chickadees and the occasional nuthatch or titmouse to take sunflower seeds from my hand. Sometimes my wife, kids, or house guests share in the wonder of allowing a 14-gram bundle of energy to perch momentarily on a finger, cock its head to one side as if to ask whether their benefactor was "right in the head," snatch a seed and flit off to a nearby branch to enjoy the morsel.

We keep seed in a small tin by the door. In winter, when times are tough

for these feathered friends, the more aggressive ones will dive-bomb a person who leaves the house through that doorway. Alas, we are often in a hurry, so after the first few chickadees are fed, unused seed is sometimes shoved into a pant pocket.

While I enjoy watching wildlife year-round, I also hunt them in season. One opening day, I found myself in my woodlot treestand, more than a quarter mile from my house, awaiting a buck. As a mixed flock of wintering birds flitted through the woods, one

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of the chickadees saw through my hunting garb and recognized me as "That-big-guy-who-feeds-us-at-the-sage-colored-house." And so the chickadee came, landed, and waited expectantly for his prize.

I was conflicted. Should I feed him? I mean, wasn't I here to kill something? Sure enough, I found a few sunflower seeds in my pocket. Out they came, and for the next half hour, I fed chickadees from my "perch," such as it was. I welcomed the company, but never lost sight of the fact that all the motion and sound might put a damper on my hunting efforts. Regardless, I was soon out of seed, and the chickadees eventually lost interest.

Later that day, one of the bolder of my black-and-white friends returned, scouting around a bit on my platform

in search of a stray seed. After having found none, it did manage to spy my trail mix conveniently tucked into a see-through storage bag. The deer weren't moving anyway, so I fed the chickadees bits of raisin and peanuts. I kept the chocolate for myself.

Over that deer season, I spent a lot of time in that tree stand. If I thought ahead, I'd bring sunflower seeds with me for my friendly visitors. They'd alight on my hat, on my hanging pack, on my gloves, and on all the things I had brought to help me acquire game. The irony peaked when one of the little buggers landed on the barrel of my 12-gauge.

I decided that although feeding chickadees in my tree might reduce my chances of a successful hunt, it was a lot of fun. And that realization won me over.

To me, and I suspect to many other hunters like me, hunting is about more than obtaining a winter's supply of protein. Getting game is important; it needs to happen at least some of the time. But being outdoors and enjoying wildlife, whether watching a buck through the early morning mist, seeing a red squirrel scampering about the forest floor, or looking eye-to-eye at a chickadee in the hand, is equally rewarding. And far more meaningful.

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