



Wild Delicate Seconds

29 Wildlife Encounters

Black Bears to Bumble Bees

CHARLES FINN

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Oregon State University Press
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Contents

Preface	11
Black Bear.....	13
Cougar.....	15
Bumble Bees	19
Ravens	21
Red Fox.....	25
Water Ouzel.....	29
Bison	33
Red-shafted Flicker.....	37
Sandhill Cranes	41
Snowy Owls	45
Western Toad	49
Great Horned Owl	53
Muskrat	55
Painted Turtles.....	57
Elk.....	61
Chickadee.....	65

Deer	69
Flying Squirrels	73
Pygmy Owl	77
Two Fawns.....	81
Red-tailed Hawk	83
Three-toed Woodpecker.....	85
Western Tiger Swallowtail	89
Osprey	93
Mountain Goats	97
Trumpeter Swans	101
Golden Eagle	103
Canada Geese.....	105
Great Blue Heron.....	109
Credits	112

Preface

In the particular is contained the universal.

—*James Joyce*

What follow are twenty-nine nonfiction micro-essays, each one a description of a chance encounter I had with a member (or members) of the fraternity of wildlife that call the Pacific Northwest home. Over the last fifteen years I've been fortunate enough to live in a variety of rural and semi-rural locations within this same geographic region. This includes Kaslo and Argenta, British Columbia; Potomac and Stevensville, Montana; and Tumalo, Sunriver, and most recently Bend, Oregon. It's no surprise that over the years my journals have filled with descriptions of black bears and bumble bees, mountain lions and muskrats, elk, pygmy owls, ravens and flying squirrels. What follows are those stories. With the exception of the snowy owls, sandhill cranes, and golden eagles, which I specifically went to see, all of these encounters were complete surprises: as I came inside from chopping wood a red-shafted flicker flapped against my cabin window; as I rested in the shade by a river a red fox suddenly appeared trotting toward me; lost, driving to a new job, and coming up over a small rise, I saw a hundred bison on the slope below me, their unmatched authority halting them in the morning sun. Because of the unexpectedness of these meetings they held a special quality for me. Always there was a timelessness, a residue of the sacred, and a lingering feeling that I was witnessing something spectacular. And I was. Because these encounters were often so brief (usually just a

matter of minutes, sometimes seconds) it seemed appropriate that I kept my accounting of them equally concise too. For this reason these essays differ from traditional “nature writing.” I have chosen not to include background information, specific locations, the natural history of the animal, or even my history with others of its kind, and in this way only the most important details survive, those few shimmering moments I spent lost to the world, alive in the company of these “other nations,” as Henry Beston describes them, the wild, feathered, and furred creatures we share this planet with. Finally, I must note that there is very little adrenaline here. There are no maulings. No narrow escapes. It is not that kind of book. Instead, it is a quiet book made up of quiet moments that any of us might have, moments (I hope) with as much grace and dignity as the animals who make up its pages. Ultimately, it is to them I owe a huge debt of gratitude.

Charles Finn
Bend, Oregon
Winter 2010

Black Bear



Black Bear

Bear. It's a big word. Say it in casual conversation and people halfway across the room will stop and cock an ear, setting their drink down or halting a fork in mid-air. Everyone wants to talk about them and everyone wants to see one. They are the denizens of our forests. They have myopic, grandfatherly eyes, bionic noses, and half-dome cartoon ears. Their can-opener claws resemble hay rakes and when they exhale it's with a fetid, composted air. Born in the dead of winter they are blind as new kittens, no bigger than shoes, pink as a ribbon you might win at a fair, nuzzling their mother until the rich milk river flows.

It is October and a sickle moon flies. A black bear crashes through the forest. She is snapping twigs, breaking branches, a pear-shaped hole in the night. She moves in a straight line, head down, shoulders rolling, her massive behind fat from the neighbor's apples pilfered this fall. It's like watching a stone tumble downhill and I stand on my front porch shivering, inarticulate words like startled grouse exploding from my throat.

When the bear stops, she is thirty paces away, her black coat gilded silver by the moon's austere light. I watch her rise on hind legs. I imagine she gives a blackberry roar.

"I've seen the nap you take in the sun," I find my voice and remind her. "I've seen the lilies you digest with such love."

The cone of her nose is pale in the moon's light and she answers with a wag of her head. Then she flops to the ground like a tree coming down. I watch her turn and plow like a fullback into the night. I go back inside.

I put my frying pan down.

Bumble Bees



Bumble Bees

In a series of ragged white orbs, each a stadium of upturned petals, curved and gently bent into a ball, clover covers the lawn. The flowers rest atop vitreous stems, faces tilted toward the sun, their centers a blush of light pink. I'm sitting on the lawn drinking tea. All around me, like oddly painted footballs, black-and-yellow-striped bumble bees move from flower to flower.

The bees move with a heavy buzz. I watch them lift the egg-shaped domes of their bodies. Each time one lands, the head of the clover dips toward the ground, and the bee rides it down, tipped until inverted inside the grass forest that surrounds it. Facing upside down, clutching the petals, it works its way round the edges, abdomen bouncing as it probes for the nectar. When the process is complete, the bee rises, moves sideways, and begins again.

The sun is a white disk in the west. Summer is all afternoon long. The flowers are polite children and the sky a canvas of Monet blues. I sit watching the bees, their inner-tube bodies overinflated, their legs like kinked eyelashes hanging down. The white-noise of their wings soothe me and, as evening approaches, crickets come out to kick in sharp song, and then the frogs, warming up like a hundred small cellos. I stay until the sun sinks below the tops of the trees, until shadows have walked the length of the lawn, until each bee exits on an invisible highway home. Tomorrow, I announce to any who might care to listen, the clover will be here and so will the bees.

I will not mow the lawn.

"*Wild Delicate Seconds* is an exquisite read, full of small surprises with big heartbeats. Finn's stories are warbler-sized. They cut through the air of the mind like flames."

—GRETEL EHRLICH, author of *The Solace of Open Spaces* and *The Future of Ice*

"I don't know when I have felt more captive to a suite of animal associations than I do in reading *Wild Delicate Seconds*. I think of Ernest Thompson Seton, both Adolf and Olaus Murie, and all of the Craigheads, written with the elegant concision of Penelope Fitzgerald and the wild whimsy of Tom Robbins. But this is Charles Finn, all by himself, except for the company of 29 memorable creatures—all the more memorable for his gem-like accounts of intimate meetings in the wild. Finn's mastery of simile, his deep, deep attention to others around him, and his humility in the presence of his evolutionary peers make this a fine book, one I shall read over and over, give away again and again, and return to when I am lonely."

—ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE, author of *Mariposa Road* and *The Thunder Tree*

In *Wild Delicate Seconds*, Charles Finn captures twenty-nine chance encounters with the everyday—and not so everyday—animals, birds, and insects of North America.

There are no maulings or fantastic escapes in Finn's narratives—only stillness and attentiveness to beauty. With profundity, humor, and compassion, Finn pays homage to the creatures we share our world with—from black bears to bumble bees, mountain lions to muskrats—and, in doing so, touches on what it means to be human.



CHARLES FINN is editor of *High Desert Journal*. His writing has appeared in more than fifty newspapers, journals, magazines, and anthologies, including *The Sun*, *Open Spaces*, *Northern Lights*, *Big Sky Journal*, and *High Country News*. Originally from Vermont and a recent resident of Bend, Oregon, he lives in Elizabeth, New Jersey with his wife, Joyce Mphande-Finn, and their two cats, Pushkin and Lutsa.

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