

EASY TO REMEMBER A SCARE CAUSED BY A WILD CREATURE

5/22/01

We have all been startled by unexpected noise or unannounced visitors when we least expect it. Chances are we would be hard pressed to recall even a fraction of them. It is true for me, with the exception of wildlife encounters, which I can vividly recall years later.

The first happened 60 years ago as I was returning from running my trap line after school one stormy, winter evening. I was plodding along, head down, bent into a heavy snowfall, eyes fixed on the toes of my snowshoes.

Suddenly, the thoughts of the welcome supper awaiting me in the warming oven of our old kitchen range were rudely interrupted. A grouse rocketed up into my face from what it believed was its sanctuary for the cold winter's night.

There have been several other wildlife encounters in the time since then that interrupted whatever reveries I may have been immersed in.

A magnificent whitetail buck provided me with a startling experience under nearly similar circumstances, except the snow was replaced by a thunderous downpour. I nearly stumbled over him as he lay in his bed, all traces of me obscured by the sound and volume of water enveloping us both.

Some of my greatest starts were caused by the smallest and most insignificant of creatures. One that I will never be able to forget occurred in my own kitchen. Arising early one morning, I started putting away some pots that were washed the night before. A junco flew out from under one of the pots. With piteous cries and flailing wings it flew into the window above the sink.

After I regained my composure, I figured out our cat had brought the offender into the house and set it free purposely to startle me.

A mouse was the next inconsequential little being that nearly caused a heart attack. As I opened a kitchen drawer at hunting camp a mother with a cluster of little ones clinging to her breasts barreled out across the counter scattering young ones in her wake.

An incident that goes back even further than 60 years happened on the banks of Catfish Creek in Oswego County. I was fishing with my father and inadvertently got between a huge black water snake and the stream. Although they are not poisonous, they are very aggressive and demonstrative announcing their presence with loud hisses and strikes. It sure made a lasting impression on me.

Many years later a bobcat did the same thing and could have caused much more damage than the snake. I had a cubby set in a spruce thicket and when I checked it I couldn't find the trap. Searching for it nearby, I was startled by a loud growl practically in my face. The cat was tangled in one of the spruces at eye level and I had nearly blundered into it.

A fisher that bolted out from under the roots of a big hollow birch as I peered curiously into the tree's dark recesses gave me an unexpected start. The fisher raced into the top of a nearby small spruce and glared threateningly at me before leaping to the ground and running away.

My last surprise happened a couple of years ago within a hundred yards of our house. I was in a canoe drifting downstream very close to the bank. A huge beaver on the bank above me did a swan dive into the water not two feet amidships of the canoe and nearly overturned it.

The all time unexpected intrusion to my mind happened to old friend John Burky. John owned a camp on Sand Lake and one evening after fishing on the lake he was sitting in the gathering darkness of the camp relaxing with a cigarette. Suddenly, with no warning, a large bear crashed through the window into the room. It exited out another window just as quickly after it witnessed John's reaction.