



Wild Kingdom

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ONE EVENING LATE LAST YEAR, DRIVING to a reception at the bookshop in Newfane, my wife, Alice, and I found ourselves following a pair of moose down the village street. They were evidently a cow and her mostly grown calf, for one was a bit larger than the other, and neither had antlers. Right in the middle of the residential street they proceeded at an easy trot, past people's houses and driveways, past parked cars. They might have been on their way to the same event we were going to — but no. Before reaching it, the pair sheered off to the right, cut through somebody's side yard, and was gone in the direction of the wooded hill that rises behind the village.

Excited by our encounter, Alice and I announced our sighting to our friends and neighbors at the bookshop as a prodigy, a near-miracle, only to find most of our listeners regarded it as no big deal. Those same moose had been seen around town all summer and fall. They were no more exotic than a family of renters from Connecticut. If we marveled at moose frequenting a Vermont village, then we were awfully easy to impress, weren't we? What did we think? Didn't we live here, too?

It is a paradox of life in our state today that, at least over much of its territory, the tamer things get, the wilder they get. Since 1970 the population of Vermont has increased by almost 40 percent. Many of those thousands of people have not occupied the state in the historic farm-and-village pattern, however, but have spread more evenly over the hills and valleys of the state, creating a relatively dispersed rural

settlement, and creating it, necessarily, at the expense of wildlife habitat.

Or so you would think. But, curiously, the same decades that have seen so much human growth have also been decades of increase for species that had been relatively uncommon in Vermont but today are, if not abundant, at least no longer rare. Not only moose but also coyote, black bear, wild turkey and fisher are found here more frequently than in the past.

Bears are a particularly good example. Thirty years ago, bears in my neighborhood were like, say, our United States senators: known to exist, but seldom or never met with. Over the last 10 years, however, they have come to be present in some areas almost to the point of nuisance, owing to their inveterate and destructive fondness for beehives, backyard barbecue grills, unsecured trash and bird feeders.

How is it that we have more wildlife around and among us as we multiply than we had when we were fewer?

Well, one handy explanation points to the well-known fact that Vermont is no longer the farm state it has been through most of its history. The small farming — especially dairy farming — on which the state's economy was based throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries no longer shapes our landscape. The open hayfields and pastures that a dairy-farming state required have been given up, to return to woodland. Vermont, which in the late 1800s was about three-quarters cleared land, was by 1998 three-quarters forest. Therefore, despite the recent increase in human population

and its attendant development, our state is today far more hospitable to woodland wildlife than it has historically been. No doubt some part of the growth in the number and diversity of wild species in Vermont is owing to this profound change in our presence on the land.

Some part — but surely not all. For consider: the post-agricultural reforestation of Vermont is a process that has been going on for most of the last 100 years, and yet the moose who stroll our village streets, the coyotes who serenade us from the wooded ridges, the bear who lay waste our sunflower seed feeders are a fairly recent phenomenon. Something else is going on.

One thing that's going on is ourselves. The apparent increase of wild creatures in Vermont over the past generation is, partly, an artifact of observation: more moose, bear and so on are seen simply because there are more eyes around to see them — more of us.

That doesn't mean our experience of local wildlife is flawed or inauthentic, however, only that it evolves. The wild becomes, not tame, but familiar. Perhaps that's a good thing. Perhaps it's a sign that, at least for the present, we have arrived at an accommodation that modern man heretofore has found nearly unattainable: a way to live with wild nature without destroying it. What we have now is a kind of tentative, ad hoc Peaceable Kingdom, in which (as the Bible does not *quite* say) the wolf dwells with the kid, the lion lies down with the lamb, the bear with the bird feeder. 🌿