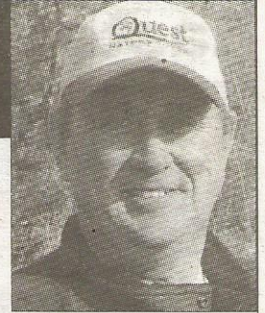


Walk Softly

GEOFF CARPENTIER

How to behave around wildlife



In my last column, I pointed out some of the bad behaviour that some folks exhibit around wildlife. Let's look at the impacts of our actions and what we can do better. I mentioned previously that people often don't realize they are impacting wild things as the reactions of the animals we're watching are usually subtle. In the Antarctic, where I have guided for several years, we are permitted to enter into the private world of many animals who have never been threatened by us. Long gone are the sealers and whalers and only the kind and gentle tourist prevails now. Luckily the tour companies who arrange these trips have reached a consensus and are eager to ensure that wildlife encounters are enjoyable for us but not disruptive to the wild things. Setback distances to feeding and resting wildlife, no entry zones around nest sites and setbacks from boats and ships to whales are clearly defined and enforced. I will be in the Galapagos when you read this as I guide there as well. As in the Antarctic, the Ecuadorian government has a strong tradition of ensuring protective encounters so setbacks to wildlife are imposed and enforced. This is a positive and wonderful thing - but don't be alarmed for in both jurisdictions you can still approach within 5 meters of most animals as long as they are not stressed.

So how do we know if the animals care or not? There are several signs - some obvious and some not so obvious. Flying or running away is clearly a sign that we're too close. Think of the nature shows where the matriarch elephant stomps her feet, flaps her ears, trumpets and makes short charges towards a photographer's jeep. These are all signs that we're too close and she is warning us to back off. At home our Gray Squirrel does similar things but usually it is limited to foot stomping, tail shaking and a grunting noise - nonetheless indicators of stress.

But long before we see dramatic responses to our proximity, other signs foretell that we're approaching

too closely. More subtly, watch the eyes and posture of birds as we approach. They will look furtively at you out of the corner of their eye and may even turn their back on you but rest assured they haven't forgotten you are there. Freezing and immobility are clear signs of stress, as are the issuance of alarm calls or nervous preening. If they have a crest you might see it raised slightly, a turtle might slip quietly off a log, a fly might walk away from you or you could see the hackles on a canine's neck. Beavers slap their tails on the water, deer may sidle away to a safe distance or a Killdeer might do its "broken wing" display to distract you. All are signs that we're too close. Essentially if the bird or animal does anything other than what it was doing before you got there, it is exhibiting some form of stress response.

So what do we do? - That's easy - back off. Give them the space they need. Keep your voices down, don't make sudden moves and don't use a flash when taking photos. Once you become attuned to the normal activities of wildlife, seeing when they're stressed or otherwise disturbed is relatively simple. Watch for the little things and then you won't ever have to worry about the big ones.

If you'd like to learn more about some of the ways that wildlife is protected in polar regions, you might be interested in my book on Antarctica where I describe not only where Antarctic animals live but how they hunt and breed and most importantly how they are protected from the very people that have come to cherish an encounter with a whale or a penguin. Contact me if you'd like to know more about this fascinating place and its wildlife or, better still, own your own copy of my book!

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