

Around Old Orange

by Jim Blaylock

We've had all sorts of adventures with animals over the years that we've lived in Orange, and I'll admit right now that I'm an animal nut of a weird variety. Mainly, I'm happy simply to see a wild creature out wandering in the world - the parrots going crazy on the telephone lines, or an acorn wood-pecker drilling a hole in a queen palm. We used to see horned owls in the lot where the Palmyra Apartments are now, back when it was mainly weeds and a few oaks and eucalyptus. Progress ultimately chased them off, and we hadn't seen any owls around Old Towne for fifteen years until recently we spotted one on the roof of St. John's - a big one, standing immovable and wise like a sentinel. After seeing it in the same spot half a dozen times, still immovable, we figured out it was made of plastic, and that took some of the thrill out of it. It reminded me of the demonstration grove of orange trees at Hart Park, and I've come to think of it lately as the demonstration owl.

Some animals, especially possums, have grown used to civilization. On more than one occasion, I've been outside at dawn and have seen enormous possums waddling down the alley across the street, or a mother possum cutting along a fence with a half dozen babies riding on top, all of them bound for some mysterious possum gathering place, going about their secret business while the rest of us sleep.

Late one night a couple of years ago, a big raccoon attacked the duck living in the yard behind us. Jay, our neighbor back there, rescued the poor duck and kept it alive until the vet opened, and then, along with his kids, he rushed it in for emergency repairs. The vet (I swear this is true) said that for ninety dollars he would save the duck's life, but that it would cost three hundred dollars for the kind of plastic surgery necessary to restore its appearance. Over the protests of his children, Jay said that he didn't mind owning an ugly duck, that he *preferred* an ugly duck, and he paid the ninety bucks and took the sewed-up duck home. Because the cut-rate surgery didn't cover vocal chord repairs, from that point on the duck never uttered another quack, and to my mind that turned out to be the silver lining in the cloud, since up until then the duck generally went on a toot, so to speak, every morning about four.

Now, here's three more animal things that happened to us, or more specifically to my oldest son, that actually seem to mean something: We were hiking up the fire trail across from the Tucker Bird Sanctuary in Modjeska Canyon - this was nine years ago, when John was three. A ring-neck dove walked out of the bushes beside the trail and stood very near to us looking around. This struck Viki and I as being fairly startling, especially when John started talking to the bird and then gave it a raisin out of the box he was carrying. The bird seemed to admire the raisin, although it didn't eat it, and when we set out again it walked beside John for a good two hundred yards, John chatting with it all the time. When we turned around it followed us back down, disappearing into the bushes finally at the very same spot where it had first appeared. Like all writers I exaggerate sometimes (though not often) but this story is absolutely true from end to end. What that bird was up to, what it thought it was doing, will remain a happy mystery to me forever, although John didn't see it as any kind of mystery. From his point of view the bird simply wanted to go along on a jolly walk with a new-found friend.

About a month later we were out at Marineland on a weekday. It was nearly deserted, and we found ourselves all alone near a big open tank containing a half dozen dolphins. A trainer appeared just then and asked John if he'd like to play ball with the dolphins. Of course he said he would, and for a good long time, all by himself, he threw a ball back and forth to all these big grinning fish standing half out of the water. The dove incident was still fresh in my mind, and it occurred to me, watching the colored ball flying back and forth, that my son was getting a solidly strange and wonderful education in the ways of animals.

In the autumn of that same year, back in Orange, we took a walk, John and I, down to the end of Pine Street where all the sheep live at the back of the high school. As usual we hung around for a while, pulling up clumps of grass and shoving them through the chain link while two or three sheep munched away. Suddenly, without warning or reason, one of the sheep lunged forward and smashed John's fingers against the fence. He yanked his hand out, falling over backward, and the animal rammed the fence again for good measure before turning around and walking away. It wasn't the tears that got to me, although there were plenty of them, it was that John turned around, looking hurt and mystified, and said, "But I was his *friend*"

Sheep treachery - how do you explain it to a three year old when you don't understand it yourself? I refrained from saying something smug like, "Let this be a lesson to you," because frankly I didn't like the lesson, which is mindless and ugly, the sort of thing you might see on an offensive bumper sticker. As for the dove and the dolphins, in their subtle way they had something far more wise and important to say. And it was something infinitely more than you can fit onto a bumper sticker, maybe something too complicated or simple to put into words at all. I did my best to tell him about it, and we headed on home.