BOBCAT!



It's interesting to consider that the wild animals we are most determined to protect are the ones we rarely see. Consider the cougar---while there were rare sightings of mountain lions at Arches National Park during my seasonal ranger days, and while I felt happy to know they were out there somewhere, I never saw one.

A European tourist once reported a bear at Turret Arch. Skeptical but dutybound to check it out (my boss made me go), I walked off trail to the area of the reported sighting, expecting to find a large brown dog. Instead, damned if I didn't find tracks but I never caught up with the bear. I still have the photos of those distinctive footprints. As far as I know it's the only confirmed case of a bear at Arches.

Bobcats were not quite as rare, though close to it. Maybe twice in a decade, I caught a fleeting glimpse of a bobcat in my headlights during a late night patrol. But once, I got lucky.

It was my job to hike the major trails in the park and provide "roving interpretation" to the many tourists I might encounter. I was no naturalist but I could fake it to a point. I had not been to Delicate Arch in a couple weeks—after all, it was mid-summer, close to 100 degrees, there is a paucity of shade, and I did not see the point in being as stupid as the visitors who had chosen mid-July to visit our park. Still the obligations of a ranger must be observed.

But when an oversized tourist from East Lansing latched onto me and peppered me with questions about the heat and the wind and rattlesnakes, I explained that my backcountry duties required me to leave the trail and investigate a reported giant scorpion sighting. I knew she wouldn't want to accompany me.

I crossed the slickrock to a small canyon near the Entrada escarpment that is cut by Salt Wash. I knew it boxed out and I would have to leave the same way I came in, but I was looking for shade and the canyon promised relief from the brutal sun. The canyon stopped abruptly barely 200 yards from the mouth, but I found plenty of cool shade under massive junipers and pinyons that grew through cracks and crevices in massive boulders, some as large as a house.

In the sandy wash, I noticed something odd.

Lying in a pool of fresh blood were four rabbit's feet. Nothing else. No bones. No ears. Just the feet and the blood. There had been a scuffle but the sand was dry and the tracks indistinct. Someone had been well fed recently, I assumed it was a coyote kill and looked for a place to sit down. I thought I'd climb the talus slope near the head of the canyon and find a good vantage point from which to eat my lunch. I started to pull my way up the rocks when I heard something.

Rrrrmmm.

What was that? I took another step.

Rrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm.

Strange. The sound was so indistinct, I thought it might be a jeep at Wolfe Ranch revving its engine. Stupid tourists, I muttered. Another step.

RRRRRRRRRMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM

I looked up. Just six or seven feet ahead of me, peering around the boulder, was a bobcat. Her expression was more curious than threatening. Clearly she could see my expression as well.

I gave out a little yelp, stumbled backwards, tripped over my own feet and fell into the wash bottom. I looked at the side of the boulder and could not see her. But then, just moments later, she emerged from the shadows and picked a spot on top of the boulder. She calmly sat down, looked at me slowly and blinked.

For the next 30 minutes we started at each other across 30 feet of open space. She posed for photos or at least tolerated me. I ate my apple and my sunflower seeds and drank my ice water and regarded my curious friend. Or was she being protective? I decided she must have a den of little bobcats up there in the rocks and was merely defending the kids. She was not about to let me out of her sight. And I was not about to get any closer, unless I wanted her rrrmmmm to become something more intimidating.

I pulled on my day pack and stood up. She stood up. I walked slowly down the wash and she followed me along the ridge of boulders. Finally she stopped, watched me move into the sunlight, then turned around and disappeared.

Seeing that mama bobcat made my day perfect. Seeing me leave made hers perfect as well.

JS

THE ZEPHYR/ OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 2009

THE BACKBONE #28

TIM LENGERICH Ajo, Az OMAR TATUM Louisville,

KY

JIM CASE

Flagstaff, AZ

Please read The Zephyr or I'll poke you in the eye with

this pitchfork...

Thank you.

Why aren't you in color, Bogie?

I'm 'old school,' Batman... Also, I'm one of Stiles' leftover B&W JPEGS.





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May the longtime sun shine upon you, all love surround you, and the pure light within you- guide your way on. Sat Nam (old sikh hymn)



