

## Unexpected wildlife encounters make lasting memories

by Ted Bailey



*Photo of Lynx. Photo Credit Ted Bailey.*

Although I have had many memorable experiences of the natural world, the ones I recall most vividly were those of unexpected—and so far pleasant—encounters with wildlife.

Hiking along an old seismic trail on the refuge years ago, I sat down on a knoll off the trail to eat lunch. As I rested in the sun I saw a lone wolf in the distance unaware I was watching it trotting toward me on a connecting trail. The wind was in my favor. I wondered what the wolf would do when it detected my scent on the main trail. But when at least one hundred feet from the main trail, the wolf suddenly stopped as if it had run into an invisible wall. Its head went up as it sniffed the air; it had apparently just detected my scent in the still distant main trail. Pausing only a few seconds the wolf did a rapid 180-degree turn and ran back along the connecting trail from whence it had just come. I'm sure the wolf never saw me partially hidden behind some small spruce trees on the knoll. I marvelled at the wolf's keen sense of smell.

One evening during moose season on the refuge I sat under a spruce tree overlooking a grassy meadow.

After about twenty minutes I detected a movement in my peripheral vision. Slowly turning I saw a curious lynx cautiously sneaking up behind me, apparently trying to determine what I was. When it crouched down and remained partially hidden behind a spruce tree about eight feet behind me, I slowly took my camera lying on the ground beside me and snapped a photo of the curious lynx. The lynx merely blinked when the flash went off so I took several more photos. After about ten minutes the lynx slowly sauntered away; its curiosity apparently satisfied.

I pleasantly recall the day that a young brown creeper landed on my chest, climbed up my brown flannel shirt, apparently decided I was a strange kind of tree and flew away to rejoin its nearby siblings and parent. Then there was the river otter swimming down the Kenai River one early fall morning years ago as I fished alone at the mouth of Soldotna Creek. Seeing me standing motionless on the bank in the early dawn light, the otter veered off course at the confluence, swam in a circle several feet in front of me while checking me out and then calmly continued on down the river.

Last winter, as my wife and I drove slowly along Skilak Lake Road on a cold afternoon, I spied a lynx nonchalantly sitting in some bushes off the road. As I backed up, the lynx slowly walked parallel to the road. After several minutes watching each other, the lynx crossed the road in front of us, merely glancing over its shoulder as it cautiously continued on its way.

This summer was not without memorable wildlife encounters. One day at the end of Skilak Overlook Trail, two robin-sized, blue-gray birds with white flash tail feathers chased insects from high perches on dead nearby spruce trees. I had never seen such birds before. Later in the summer my son saw a distinctively marked juvenile of the same species near Cooper Lake and determined that it was a Townsend's solitaire, a species neither of us had ever seen before on the Kenai Peninsula.

We subsequently saw yet another Townsend's solitaire near the end of Vista Trail, perhaps one of the same individuals we saw earlier on Skilak Overlook Trail. That same evening while driving east on Skilak

Lake Road a black bear emerged from the vegetation behind the Bear Mountain Trailhead sign ahead of us. We followed behind the bear at a comfortable-to-the-bear distance nearly a mile as it slowly sauntered down the road snacking on roadside vegetation, excreting a pile of berry-laden poop and scratching its ears with its hind foot before leisurely leaving the road.

And this past week after I recently remarked to my wife that I had not seen a northern shrike in years, we saw a large bird fly to the top of a spruce tree near our house. It was a northern shrike and was being

“mobbed” by five red-breasted nuthatches. I watched it closely with binoculars for nearly fifteen minutes, savouring the rare observation before it flew away with the excited nuthatches in swift pursuit.

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