

## REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

### GIVING ANIMALS A VOICE: LETTERS FROM AN ASHLAND DEER

John Yunker

Animals talk. All around us, they converse and whisper and shout. But because they speak in different languages, we, like travelers in a foreign land, often tune out their voices, generalizing them into a background of bird calls, squirrel chirps, and dog barks. But there are some of us, such as naturalists and writers, who do try to interpret these foreign languages. Naturalists have devoted lifetimes to unlocking the secrets of the whale's sonar songs and the prairie dog's complex vocabulary. And they have slowly progressed, albeit paced by peer reviews and the scientific phobia of being accused of *anthropomorphizing* animals.

Writers are bound by no such restrictions. Writers are free to imagine, to speculate, to invent languages. Writers are bound only by the reader's suspension of disbelief. Writers give voices to animals in novels and short stories, in poems and picture books. And, as this essay illustrates, even through letters to the editor. What follows is a story of how I was inspired to give my own voice to a species that needed one in an ongoing, life-and-death drama taking place in a small town in Oregon.

#### BACKSTORY: WHERE SUBURBS MEET WILDERNESS

Ashland is a small, Southern Oregon town on the edge of the Klamath National Forest, one of the most ecologically diverse regions in the United States. So it's no surprise that the streets of Ashland are sometimes traversed not only by humans and cars but by bears, coyotes, mountain lions, and, most common of all, black-tailed deer. Deer have over the years become so comfortable in Ashland that they have made it their home. It's

hard to blame them. The town offers a plethora of food in the forms of lush landscaping and organic gardens, as well as a degree of protection from mountain lions (though not cars). And for many years, the human residents have been mostly accommodating of the neighborhood cervids.

But in the past seven years that I've lived in Ashland I've noticed a changing sentiment. Ashland is home to a growing number of people relocating from large urban areas, such as San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle. People who are not accustomed to seeing deer on their front lawns, let alone eating their front lawns. People who view such animals as a nuisance. And a vocal number of people have begun to view deer as a threat.



#### DEER ATTACK!

In journalism, there is an aphorism: *If a dog bites a man, it is not news; if a man bites a dog, that is news.* In 2015, a handful of residents reported being “stalked” and “attacked” by deer, a story that quickly gathered national attention. We don't know exactly what was behind these attacks, how severe they actually were, or even if they actually happened, as there were no reported hospital visits and no police reports. Naturalists generally agree that these “attacks” were simply the result of female deer protecting their young. A mother deer will cross the street

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to stand between a dog and her young, an act that is justifiably intimidating to humans. Just because a dog walker doesn't see fawns nearby doesn't mean they are not there. I, too, once encountered a mother deer that put herself between me and her fawns. I stopped and turned around. But sometimes people don't see the deer approaching in time to react.

In the media, a chorus of voices began calling for a "culling" of the deer. At the time of these complaints, the city was conducting controlled burns in the hills surrounding Ashland in an effort to minimize forest fires, and a number of mountain biking competitions were also taking place—both of which could have led to a greater number of deer wandering through town. I felt that something needed to be done in defense of these creatures that I love sharing our town with. And I realized that amidst all the chatter a critical voice was not being heard—the voices of the deer themselves.

### LETTERS FROM AN ASHLAND DEER

So I undertook an anonymous (until now) letter-writing campaign taking on the voice of an Ashland deer. These letters were published in a free and widely read Ashland periodical, *Sneak*

*Preview*, and generated significant reader response. Here is the first letter, published in July 2015, from "the deer," written with the goal of giving the deer perspective.

*Letter from an Ashland deer to the residents of Ashland,*

*It has come to my attention over the past year that a number of Ashland residents are unhappy with our presence in their yards and streets. Some have gone so far as to propose the culling (oh, let's not sugar-coat it: slaughtering) of deer.*

*True, we deer do enjoy your landscaping a bit too much. And, yes, we do not observe local traffic laws, something we're working on (a few additional deer crossing signs would certainly help). Some residents wonder why we don't simply return to our "home" up in the wilderness that surrounds the town.*

*I'm writing to tell you that we've tried. Trust me on this. But so far our efforts have been thwarted. Allow me to explain.*

*A few months ago, we spent a few evenings in the forest only to be awakened by humans setting brush fires all around us. We later learned that this was part of Ashland's ongoing "thinning" project, which, for the record, we support. But all this cutting and burning does make it rather difficult for us deer to settle in up there, wouldn't you think? And good luck finding something to eat amidst all that charred underbrush.*

*Nevertheless, I convinced a handful of fellow deer to give the woods one more try. After a bit of searching we found an uncharred section to settle down in, only to be terrorized as wave upon wave of mountain bikers descended upon us. Apparently, there was some sort of race going on, and I don't mind telling you that we felt safer dodging cars on the streets of Ashland than dodging bikers up on those hills.*

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*For those humans who find deer a nuisance in Ashland, I simply wish to stress that we deer have similar thoughts regarding humans in our forests.*

*I sincerely hope that most residents do not support the killing of our kind. We know that the tourists love to see us—and, so I'm told, a good many locals. I ask that we all follow the wise instruction of a bumper sticker I often seen around town and "coexist."*

*Kindly yours,*

*An Ashland deer*

The Ashland Deer soon received letters in reply. In one letter, the author documented the "trauma" she suffered while walking her dog and accused the deer of "terrorizing" residents. Another letter writer suggested deer sterilization (a solution that has proven ineffective in other towns). What I found interesting was not just that people were responding to the deer, including addressing the deer directly, but that there was a great deal of passion behind their letters. Instead of a debate between two humans with the deer remaining voiceless, here was a debate between the human and the deer.

The Ashland deer responded to the first round of comments, in the September 2015 issue, as follows:

*Your Ashland Deer Again,*

*First, I wish to thank you for your thoughtful responses to my initial letter. Clearly, this is an issue that incites passions both for and against my species, your silent cohabitants.*

*To the president of the Ashland Woodland and Trails Association, I did not wish to imply that all mountain bikers drive dangerously. We deer do appreciate the efforts of the vast majority of Ashlanders and visitors to coexist with us in town as well as in the hills above town.*

*To the resident who lives in fear of a stalking, malicious deer, I sincerely apologize for your troubles. As with any species, there are always a few "bad apples." Trust me when I say that we deer are, by nature, keen to avoid humans. It is only when we're protecting our young that, well, our hormones can get the better of us.*

*But should all deer suffer from random killings or sterilization simply because a mother was aggressive in her efforts to protect her young? Should a rogue deer be used to justify terrorizing all deer? As one letter noted, more than 250 deer have died from car accidents from 2001 to 2011. Isn't this enough culling of our species?*

*Finally, to the resident who proposes bow hunting within city limits: Right now —perhaps thanks to Cecil the Lion — I am picturing a viral video of a deer with an arrow jutting from her bleeding neck, dazed and stumbling through an Oregon Shakespeare Festival Green Show.*

*Surely the wise business and tourism leaders of Ashland appreciate that people visit our beautiful town of Ashland to experience nature — not escape from it. They visit to appreciate wildlife — not see it slaughtered.*

*I understand that we deer are not universally loved or appreciated, but here in Ashland, we all live on the edge of a national forest. If Ashland were to one day lose its wildlife, it would lose so much more.*

*Peacefully yours,*

*Your Ashland Deer*

As these letters were running back and forth, a number of residents rallied for the city to act, which resulted in a "Deer Summit" held later that year in the city council chambers. At this standing-room-only meeting, the mayor claimed that he, too, had been stalked by a deer. A few local experts, who had

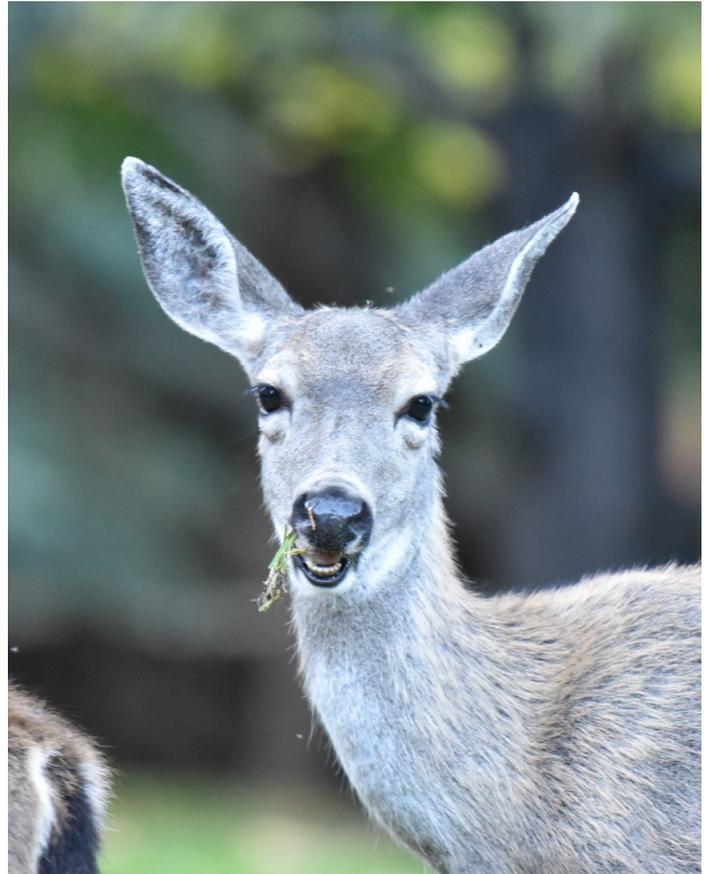
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studied the deer issue for many years, said that sterilization was futile, as was the idea of killing deer; other deer would simply take their place.

But that didn't prevent more than a dozen residents from urging the city to undertake some sort of culling. Yet, as is the case with so much abstract talk about killing animals, the details are often far messier than people would like to admit. Exactly how such a slaughter would be effected was unclear. Would all residents be required to stay inside while hunters roamed the streets with guns, or bows and arrows? This is why so much nastiness occurs when killing wildlife remains in the dark. We like to assume that hunters kill animals with one shot, that animals feel nothing. We don't want to think of deer wandering the streets with an arrow in their necks, or missing legs, or bleeding on our sidewalks. Fortunately, about a dozen residents spoke up in defense of the deer. For every woman who said she felt in danger walking the streets of Ashland, another woman spoke up saying she felt perfectly safe.

Two years later, I'm happy to report that no culling has been proposed. The city now posts warning signs when residents report being harassed by deer, and no-feeding signs have gone up as well. I don't believe the issue has gone away so much as hibernated as other, more pressing issues took precedent. But I do believe the deer articles made a difference. Because the minute people begin addressing an animal the way one addresses a human, something changes in the discussion. Perhaps this is why those who resist the idea of animal rights are so quick to tell activists not to "humanize" animals.

There is no reason that deer alone can wield a pen. Certainly other species that are often demonized, such as wolves, cougars, and bears, could dash off a letter or two. And I encourage anyone who faces deer conflicts—or any other human-wildlife conflict—in his or her town to copy these letters and reuse them as needed.



### HUMOR MAY SUCCEED WHERE FACTS FAIL

The goal with these letters was to humanize the deer. When an animal has a voice, that animal feels significantly closer to humans. Our companion animals speak to us, and more often than not, we know exactly what they're saying. If we can hear them—and enjoy their Facebook and Instagram pages—why not give voices to less popular species when it really matters?

Ultimately, I believe animal letters can help in activism. And they can be entertaining, both to write and to read. Our local *Sneak Preview* includes a regular feature at the back of the magazine, profiling a member of the community with a Q and A.

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Needless to say, our Ashland Deer did not want to be left out. This profile published a few months after the Deer Summit, in September of 2016:

**Profile:** An Ashland Deer

**Birthplace:** Above the boulevard.

**Birthdate:** I don't remember the exact date but it was dark, and the sky was clear.

**Marital Status:** Still playing the field.

**Tell us something about your organization and/or job:** I strive to visit Ashland's most lush lawns and gardens. I also enjoy posing for photographs as the tourists pass through town. I like to think of us as the unofficial ambassadors of Ashland.

**How long have you lived in Southern Oregon?** Ever since I was born.

**Favorite movie:** Any movie but *Bambi* or *The Deer Hunter*.

**Favorite play:** *Into the Woods*

**Favorite actor:** Joaquin Phoenix. He's a big fan of all animals.

**Favorite actress:** Helen Mirren. She shared a wonderful scene in *The Queen* with a member of my species.

**Favorite TV show:** *Downton Abbey*. Oh, how I yearn for those juicy gardens!

**Favorite radio station:** KSKQ

**Favorite book of all time:** *Animal Farm*

**What book are you currently reading?** I tend to read less during the busy summer months.

**Favorite magazine:** *Vegetarian Times*.

**Favorite pet of all time:** Any pet that is securely leashed.

**Other than friends or family, what person do you admire most?** The fine people who came to my defense at City Hall last fall. It's nice to know we deer have friends in high places.

**What's the first thing you turn to when you read a daily newspaper?** Weather forecast. I like to have the chance to take cover rather than get stuck in a sudden downpour.

**Favorite part of the *Sneak Preview*:** The letters.

**Favorite hobbies:** Chewing my cud. Also, looking into the windows of people's homes at night and catching the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*.

**Favorite Beatle and/or Beatle song:** "We Can Work it Out"

**Favorite local restaurants:** Lithia Park, and the median along Siskiyou Boulevard.

**What would you do if you won \$10 million in the lottery?** Buy a few dozen of Ashland's finest homes and turn them into affordable housing, and take down all the deer fences.

**What is the most important thing you learned as a child?** Look both ways before crossing the road.

**What person or event had the biggest impact on your life?** My mother. When I still had my spots she told me that if I was going to make it in this town I had to stand my ground around dogs but also know when to run for it.

**Proudest achievement:** Getting to those sunflowers on Gresham Street.

**Favorite thing about Ashland:** So many organic gardens. And so many kind and tolerant people who don't mind when we nibble our way through.

At the time these pieces were published, I had not revealed myself as the writer, and I listened to people discuss the topic at cafés and happy hours. I was glad that people were talking

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about the deer in a way that they hadn't before—in a way that allowed for the animal to finally have a voice. Whether it's a letter to the editor or a profile that reveals a little bit of life in someone else's shoes, lending our voices to the animals takes us farther down the path toward mutual understanding and—I hope—peaceful coexistence.

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John Yunker is a writer of plays, short stories, and novels focused on human–animal relationships. He is the editor of the anthology *Among Animals: The Lives of Animals and Humans in Contemporary Short Fiction* (Ashland Creek Press, 2014), and co-founder of Ashland Creek Press, an independent press devoted to environmental and animal rights literature. [john@ashlandcreekpress.com](mailto:john@ashlandcreekpress.com).

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