

Dispatches from Feral Hollow: The Neighbors

Pull up a bench.

Not a metaphor - we have actual benches, rough half-logs split with a chainsaw and dragged into a circle around the fire. If you were here, we'd hand you something hot to drink and something to toast over the coals, and this is the kind of thing we'd talk about while the fire settled into embers.

We orient ourselves on this land by our animal kin. Not by compass points alone, though those matter too - but by who lives where, who passes through, who has claimed their territory and made it known to us over the years we've been here learning to read this place.

To the east, the red-tailed hawk. She has nested in the same trees every spring since we arrived during the Covid years, when the world went quiet and we came here and the land started teaching us things. Every February we watch for her return, and every February she comes. She has become a kind of marker of continuity - the year turning, the nest going up, the tiercel bringing her food while she sits. East is hawk territory. We know this in our bodies now.

The deer and the bear and the turkeys come from the east too, following the old logging road down the mountain through our hollow like they have been following it since long before we arrived and will be following it long after we're gone. That road remembers more footsteps than ours.

To the south is the wetland. Blue heron country. She comes and stands in that still water with the particular dignity of a creature who has been doing exactly this for a very long time and knows it. The snakes live south too - all kinds, found in all the places you find snakes when you're paying attention, which we have learned to be.

To the west, under the mountain laurel, right over our spring - the bobcat. A mother, most years, with kits. This is the kind of thing that still stops us mid-sentence when we remember we live here. Some early summer evenings we hear them playing. Sometimes what we hear are little meows, surprisingly domestic, surprisingly tender, drifting up from the laurel thicket in the last light. We try not to disturb her. She has claimed that hillside and we respect it.

To the north - that's where our raccoon comes from. And the spotted skunk.

The spotted skunk.

He looks like he stepped directly off a French hair commercial. We are not exaggerating. He has the most beautiful, long, flowing coat you have ever seen on a wild animal. He is frankly glamorous. He knows it.

He had developed a habit of coming in to eat the dog's food, which we were working on discouraging. One night my partner came around the corner in the dark, saw a small fluffy creature eating from the dog bowl, assumed it was our cat - who also, despite our best efforts, loved dog food and had a whole complicated relationship with that bowl - and without fully thinking it through, gave him a light swat on the backside and told him no.

The spotted skunk paused.

We imagine he was experiencing something between profound confusion and genuine affront. No one, in his entire beautiful life, had ever done that. No one does that to a skunk. The whole architecture of his existence is built on the premise that no one does that.

He ran. Thankfully. Mercifully. My partner's hand smelled like skunk for days. We considered this entirely fair.

The bears deserve their own fire story.

We came home late one night from our mentors' place - the kind of late where you are already tired before you walk in the door - to find that a black bear had located our camping supplies and eaten an entire pound of coffee. We scared her off with the car horn and went to bed.

She came back.

We scared her off again.

She came back again.

This continued all night. Every few hours, the sound of a bear who had consumed a pound of coffee and was apparently not experiencing sleepiness as a side effect, returning to investigate whether there was more. Every few hours, the car horn. Every few hours, brief silence, then the sounds of a large caffeinated animal in the dark.

We dragged ourselves into town the next morning for coffee because a black bear had eaten ours and then kept us up all night. This is a sentence we have said out loud to people. They don't always believe us.

Her son, when he was a juvenile just finding his feet in the world, had a period of climbing trees at night and attempting to jump onto our bear-boxed cooler. We watched this from the window with the particular mixture of alarm and helpless fondness that this land has taught us is the appropriate response to most things.

This is Feral Hollow. We tell these stories because knowing who lives here is part of how we protect it. You can't tend what you don't love. You can't love what you haven't met.