

Mother Earth



Pet Sounds

By Gayle Morrow

About this time fifty years ago (Fifty! Good Lord!), Brian Wilson, Mike Love, and the other members of The Beach Boys were putting the finishing touches on a musical masterpiece. This influential tour-de-force that gave us “Sloop John B” (my personal favorite) and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice” did not yet have a title. It did have, however, in addition to a looming release date, a panoply of somewhat atypical, for the time, sounds mixed in; those were, according to one account of how the album was named, Brian Wilson’s favorites, his Pet Sounds.

When you live closely with animals—pets and otherwise—you come to realize their sounds, their vocalizations, mean something. If you’re out and about you might catch the snort of a startled deer, the putt-putt of a hen turkey, the whirr of a rattlesnake, the cry of a soaring red-tail.

At home the cats have their sad, I’m-so-hungry-I-can-barely-meow sounds when it’s close to feeding time,

or when they think it should be feeding time. One of my horses makes a sort of whistling noise when he smells something he doesn’t like—a bear, for instance. If we’re riding, that’s my cue to collect the reins and be ready. If he’s in the pasture, I need to go see what’s going on and perhaps encourage the bear to leave. Dogs, of course (barking dogs were included on Pet Sounds), have a friendly oh-hooray-we-have-company bark and a who-the-hell-are-you-and-why-are-you-at-my-door vocalization that it’s best to heed, especially when you’re that person at the door. I had a dog once who would sit in the living room and look longingly out the window at the female dog who lived across the road, whining softly and giving me pleading glances.

His wishes could not have been made plainer had he spoken to me in words.

For sheer entertainment, though, nothing beats the sounds of chickens. You don’t know what you’re missing if you’ve never heard young roosters

learning to crow. I’ve noticed the hens often “egg” each other on with a “bagawking” when one is doing her thing in the nesting box. Like a labor coach, maybe? When the flock is out in the yard and one of the roosters finds something tasty, he makes a distinctive noise that brings the hens running. When there is trouble in the coop—say a bobcat—there is no mistaking those kinds of chicken noises and you, as the human in charge, better get out there fast! And at night, when they go to roost, the sounds they make are almost like a purr.

Brian Wilson is scheduled to perform Pet Sounds at various venues throughout 2016. I don’t know if I will be lucky enough to hear him, but I can go outside anytime I want and listen for my own pet sounds. You can, too.

Keystone Press Award-winning columnist Gayle Morrow is the former editor of the Wellsboro Gazette.

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Location, Location, Location

By Gayle Morrow

It’s that time in the cycle of life when the little birds are staking out territory, building nests, and incubating young ones, and so I was reminded of crossing paths late last spring with a pair of robins in the process of raising a family. They had built a lovely home for their clutch of blue eggs; the construction site was not high up in a tree, however, but atop a small woodpile, not three feet off the floor of an unused cabin’s porch. The first time I noticed it I had been sitting on said porch, engrossed in a book, but finally made to look up and around by the incessant and distinctive chirping of an annoyed robin.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, and then spied the nest, almost close enough to touch. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.” I relocated to a further corner and tried to be inconspicuous while the robin (mother or father, I

don’t know) swept in, sat on the nest for a moment, then flew off again, scolding me severely. Over the next couple of weeks the parents adjusted somewhat to my occasional presence—enough so that one of them would sit for several minutes on the eggs while I was around, but also enough so they felt comfortable kind of dive bombing me and telling me in no uncertain terms that they didn’t especially care for me being so close. Then came the day I saw the little fluff balls in the nest where eggs had been. Very cool! By my next visit, though, disaster had struck, at least from the robins’ perspective. The nest was gone—not a twig or a pinfeather left. It must have been easy pickin’s for a coon or a fox—I suppose even a bear could have ambled up the porch steps and had a nice snack. Maybe it was this pair’s first foray into parenthood, or perhaps there was another reason. Regardless,

they had not chosen their location well, and the results were deadly.

A friend told me she had seen something similar with Baltimore orioles. They had hung their nest on a low branch, giving a hungry raven the proverbial birds-eye view of the goings-on. When the time was right, access was easy. Everybody’s got to eat, right?

They say elephants mourn their dead. I don’t know about robins. But they often hatch two batches of little ones in a summer, so it’s possible the couple I was watching learned, if not mourned, from their mistake and enjoyed more success their second time around.

At least they did not rebuild on the same woodpile.

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The Scent-sational Smell of the Seasons

By Gayle Morrow

Don't you love the smells of summer? Sheets fresh off the line, a bouquet of dill or cilantro straight from the garden, newly mown hay, cool rain on hot pavement, Pine Creek on a hot August night, a berry patch on a sweltering afternoon. In the middle of the dry spell we were having I was noticing a different odor that seemed atypical of the fecundity associated with the season. It took me a while to identify it, but what it turned out to be was the giant ferns in our fern garden withering and dying prematurely. They don't smell like this in the fall when their natural growing/dying cycle isn't so influenced by an extreme lack of water.

The natural world is replete with a smorgasbord of smells, many of them unique to the seasons. When was the last time you stepped outside and really took a good whiff of what's out there? As summer wanes we can take in the last of the garden fragrances as we're canning and freezing the season's bounty. I don't know what makes leaves on the ground in the fall smell the way they do, but that, and the smell of them burning, has to be the most familiar fragrance of autumn. Big patches of goldenrod and wild asters also have a luscious and distinctive fall aroma.

As early winter creeps in, you might notice the air itself has a different smell, especially after the first hard frost. Then comes

the forecast for a snowstorm and, yes, you can really smell snow in the air, just like you can smell a summer rainstorm in the offing. Sometimes it is a dampness telling you the flakes will be wet and heavy, or a kind of thinness that lets you know the snow will be dry.

One of my favorite outdoor smells comes on that first day in the spring when you can finally smell the earth again. There may still be a good deal of white stuff hanging around, but even then the intoxicating promise of life wafts up from those damp, bare patches of ground.

Try imagining yourself as that happy dog we've all seen as we're driving down the road—your head is out the open window, your ears are flying in the breeze (well, if your ears are small and close to your head they're not, but, still ...), images are flashing by so fast your eyes can hardly take them in, and your nose, ah, yes, your nose. It is in olfactory overload. Go ahead. Throw out your dryer sheets and ditch the Febreze, open the windows, turn off the AC, and go have a smell!

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