

The Animal Antics of Camping

Take any wild animal, combine with any camping aficionada, throw in a bike or two, and you get mayhem. Whether they are attracted to me because of my animal magnetism, or I happen to be invading their space, critters seem to be drawn to my adventures in droves.

I'll never forget the time, when camping in a farmer's field in Wales, I woke up at daybreak to the sound of chewing—loud, nonstop munching. I cautiously unzipped my tent flap and peeked out, not knowing who or what to expect. A herd of cows had encircled my tent, and were inquisitively considering what else was inside for breakfast, as they noisily chewed their cud. Surprised, I broke out into raucous laughter, and the cows, unamused, quickly rambled off. I wish I had my camera ready so that I could have documented images of that farcical sight.

I also distinctly remember a 10-day, self-contained biking and camping trip in Wisconsin, along Lake Michigan. I went with my good biking buddy Wendy, and we traveled from Appleton up through Door County (the thumb of Wisconsin), and across the northern part of the state. During this trip, I had invented the goal of making every cow in each field look at me, by mooing loudly as I cycled by. It got to be pretty comical after awhile, because I would not give up. I proudly confess that I finally managed to meet my goal. To this day, I cannot ride by a bunch of cows in a field without mooing...sheep, either, for that matter—baaahing, that is. Luckily, Wendy is amused, and not embarrassed, by my animalistic imitations and goofy antics.

What was most remarkable about this particular trip, however, were the stunning fall colors. Few places compare with northern Wisconsin during the fall season—the beauty of its landscape is breathtaking. At one of our last stops, we camped in the Copper Falls State Park in northern Wisconsin along the Bad River. Located north of Mellen, this park was a kaleidoscope of brilliant hues—vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows—amidst the 29-foot falls. Miles of copper-colored waters were surrounded by vividly colored woods and steep-walled canyons.

It's funny how people often do not discover the gems in their own backyard until they leave the area. I had grown up in Kimberly, a small paper-mill town 20 miles south of Green Bay, and I had never visited Door County or seen many of the sights in northern Wisconsin while I lived there. It was when I was living in Arizona that I went back and bicycled around Wisconsin, seeing it with wonder-struck eyes. That captivating view was altered, however, when those pesky rascals showed up at our campsite that night.

I must admit that Wendy and I had gotten a little lazy with our food storage. We religiously hang bear bags when out in the wilds canoeing. But, our European bicycling trip had spoiled us. We kept food in the tent or in our panniers (packs that fit on the frame or rack of a bike) most every night for seven months without mishap. Camping in Wisconsin with raccoons on the loose, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter.

Just after dark, we heard our metal cooking pot being dragged across the picnic table, so Wendy went out and packed it away. Although the culprits were nowhere in sight, we had camped often enough to know that it was most likely raccoons that were up to the mischief. We settled in again for the night, but within minutes, we heard scratching noises and the rustling of something plastic.

This time, both of us came out of the tent to investigate. The raccoons had been scratching at our panniers, trying to get at the food inside. They had also clawed open the plastic bags that we had put over our bike seats to keep them dry overnight. Bikers out there beware: do NOT use food bags to cover your seats in raccoonland! These scrappy scavengers thought there was food inside the bags and literally, ripped Wendy's seat to smithereens. My seat had one minor scratch across the top of it. (Important Update: This scratch has started to wear, and now my seat looks almost like Wendy's did when this first happened. I've thought about replacing it, but it brings me so much amusement—I chuckle and shake my head, remembering those raccoons, every time I get on my bike.)

After removing the bags from our bike seats, we returned to our tent with our panniers, our food securely tucked away within them. I took out a couple of items and stored them next to the opening of our tent, under the fly. I wanted to keep these things cool overnight. There was a carton of yogurt and a container of cream cheese—gourmet goodies for my morning meal. Never in my wildest dreams did I think those raccoons would be bodacious enough to steal my breakfast treats.

And dreaming I was, until I heard the top of a yogurt container being popped. Somehow that particular noise woke me out of a sound sleep. Immediately recognizing the sound, I bolted upright, yelling, "They have my yogurt!" Still fast asleep, Wendy had no idea what was happening as I seized the flashlight and aimed its beam outside the tent.

The light illuminated the shape of a raccoon sitting less than 10 feet away from us. It was shoveling yogurt into its mouth faster than humanly

possible. I knew by its frenzied motion that there was no way I was going to get that yogurt container out of its tiny, black hands. In fact, it was almost as if that raccoon was staring me down, daring me to attempt it.

Opening the front zipper of the tent, I checked for the cream cheese under the fly. Of course, it was gone, too. That raccoon did not flinch, even when I acted like I was going to charge out of the tent after it. Now I was mad, knowing that I had nothing to eat for breakfast. By this time, Wendy was awake, and I commanded that we go out and look for my cream cheese right then and there.

Somehow, she convinced me that we would never find it in the dark. So, eventually, we both went back to sleep. But, not before I made sure that raccoon was not out there eating my cream cheese. Extremely irritated by its smugness, I had to make certain that it was gone for good. Several times over the course of the next hour, I surreptitiously grabbed the flashlight, flicked on its beam, and pointed it out into the night. Finally satisfied that the thief had left the premises, I fell back asleep.

Before we left camp the next morning, I did find the container, minus the cream cheese and the top. It had been licked clean. I learned my lesson, camping on my bike in raccoon territory. According to *EEK, the Environmental Education for Kids* electronic magazine: "Nighttime means mealtime for raccoons. They are omnivorous, which means that they eat both plants and animals. Raccoons like a mixture of nuts, fruits, berries, seeds, insects, frogs, turtles, eggs, crayfish, carrion (dead meat) and garbage!"

I would add yogurt and cream cheese to that list. I would also add my final piece of advice for camping in raccoonland: Never, ever underestimate the cleverness of a raccoon. It is more wiley than a coyote and not nearly as companionable as a cow!