

Twelve acres

In June of 2019, my husband and I moved to rural California to live at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains in the Sierra Foothills. It was a romantic notion. We were going to be living in wine country! We would grow grapes, make wine, and tend to a hearty vegetable garden. We would slow down. We bought twelve acres with an old farmhouse and barn on it. There were open fields and forested areas with pine trees as tall as skyscrapers, mature apple trees, and a few grape vines perfect for making jam. We named the property 'Verdania'.

When we first moved here from the Bay Area, there were two horses living on the property. Each morning I watched them grazing out my bedroom window. I loved it. Every afternoon I would take a break from work to feed them carrots I started buying for them at the store. Food is an excellent way to develop a relationship with just about anyone, including our non-human friends. The horses would come running over to chomp on their afternoon snack. I started to see their different personalities. One was shy and timid, sometimes a loner. Another was bossy and greedy, clearly the leader.

Not long after we moved in, the couple who owned¹ the horses brought over two more to help manage the vegetation as we approached wildfire season. We quickly learned that keeping the grass low was good fire prevention, and the horses were here to eat the grass. Essentially the animals were working on behalf of all of us who lived in the area. They grazed the fields, lived a good life, and the land we lived on was safer for it during wildfire season.

These majestic creatures are excellent weed whackers. They did such a good job that most of the land was dirt by August, which made it really dusty during the long,

dry summer months. But more importantly, the horses had eaten most of the vegetation on about ten acres of our property. They were no longer getting enough food, so we sent the horses home.

I was sad the horses were gone and I missed them, but there are many other animals that either live on our property or come passing through on their way to someplace else. As I walk the perimeter with my dog, Scout, I have spotted many wildlife trails – well-worn paths the local wildlife have walked over the years.

Deer are as common as the native Steller's jays in the foothills. The day we moved in, a doe and two fawns ran across our front yard and my heart leapt with joy. The young fawns were likely just weeks old. Those first few months were stressful though. As I would walk outside, I would often accidentally startle a family of deer who would bounce off towards the busy road. My heart would sink with worry that one would be hit by a car. It's common to see a deer dead on the side of the road. I wish people would drive at the speed limit and pay more attention. We have moved into the deer's territory, after all.

Over time, I worry less and enjoy watching them from afar as they graze in our backyard. I can often sneak a peek from my desk in the middle of the day. One day just weeks after we moved in, one of the does walked right up to our picture window in the front of the house where my cat, Loki, was sitting in a cat tree, safely inside. The doe was just a few feet away from Loki, very curious about this new being in the 'neighbourhood'. Loki, who is skittish at times, was surprisingly calm during this meeting. They gazed at each other for a few moments, and, just like that, the doe bounced off. I mean, do deer have springs

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in their legs? While it sure looks like they do, their legs are made of much of the same material as humans: bones, muscle, and ligaments. While we look so different from most other species, we all share much of the same DNA.

As you can see, even with the horses gone, I still spy some wonderful sights on these twelve acres. There was the time I let my dog out at dawn to see a Sierra Nevada red fox running in the back pasture with breakfast hanging out of her mouth. There was the morning my two domestic cats were staring out the screen door at a mountain lion watching them from about 150 feet away. And one late morning, my husband and I were working in the yard and spotted a bobcat observing us from the woods.

With all the beautiful trees around our house, we have the luxury of spying many amazing birds on a regular basis. Black-chinned and ruby-throated hummingbirds have flown within a few feet of my face. More than once, I have been sitting on the sofa looking out our picture window and a hummingbird has come right up to the glass, flapping her wings so fast, just to say hi, I think. I have also spotted western and mountain bluebirds, goldfinches, and woodpeckers, which are a dime a dozen in the trees around the house.

Living here involves all of our senses. Many nights I go to sleep to the sound of owls hooting. And, just the other day, I listened to songbirds play near the honeysuckle. There are also unwelcome smells – those unfortunate mornings when I wake up and know a skunk has come calling.

We also have frogs and lizards from spring to fall, sometimes making their way inside the house. We enjoy catching and returning them safely to the great outdoors.

Now there is one creature I haven't mentioned and yet plays an enormous role here at Verdania: the relentless California ground squirrel (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*). Who knew that this small, energetic creature would become our biggest nemesis?

Walking around the property can be quite dangerous – you just never know where you might stumble over a new burrow.

Apparently, these industrious creatures may share a burrow with other squirrels but like to build their own entrances. Even squirrels see themselves as individuals, just like us humans.

The squirrels are mostly herbivorous and live on nuts, seeds, grains, fruits and sometimes roots. And while I openly embrace and promote a herbivorous diet, this is exactly where the problem lies. They want to eat all our food. They eat the apples and walnuts from our trees with great abandon. They devour our tomatoes, making it fruitless even to plant the first seed come springtime. The walnut and apple trees were planted many years before I ever even visited the Sierra Foothills, so I wasn't attached to the harvest. But when we planted the fig and persimmon trees last fall, we used gopher baskets to protect the roots and installed fencing around each tree to protect them from the wildlife as if to say, “Mine! Stay away!”

Don't get me wrong. The squirrels aren't the only animals enjoying the fruit. Deer especially love the apples and grapes, not just the fruit but also the leaves, which basically incapacitates the plant, at least for that season. Jackrabbits expressed a lot of interest in our cucumber, melon, and zucchini plants. It's unclear who destroyed those plants: the rabbits or the squirrels.

While there are many ravagers of our fruits and vegetables, the squirrels are at the top of the list. I have talked to local farmers to see how we might solve this problem, but they claim they don't have ground squirrels. It seems the squirrels have traveled from all over for an indefinite stay on 'our' land because there are hundreds roaming and burrowing at any one time. They build a lot of burrows out in the pastures – some are so large, I have begun to wonder if a drug cartel is using the squirrels for its own purpose. They also build burrows around the house that lead under the foundations. This is more problematic than the squirrels eating the apples and nuts.

The squirrels' predators are rattlesnakes, eagles, foxes, badgers and weasels. Sounds like we need more foxes. I have researched ways to manage the squirrel population

on the property, and I have not found any acceptable methods. Research suggests we poison, place bombs in the burrows, shoot them with a gun, trap and kill, or use dogs to reduce the population. This is how country folk would handle the problem, and many would not blink an eye at any of these methods. As someone who has lived a vegan lifestyle for 16 years, I'm uncertain how to proceed because killing another being is not my MO.

You see, I have watched these squirrels. They remind me of kittens – playing with each other; rolling and romping around together. I've seen them fighting. From the kitchen window, I've watched them standing on their hind legs and using their two front paws to hold an apple as they take a few bites, then just toss it aside because they know there are many more apples to be had. When I walk outside, they scatter at the speed of light. They are fast little critters, just like kittens. If kittens matter – and they do – then I think these squirrels matter too.

When I lived in Richmond, CA, tree squirrels would yank plums from our tree, take one bite, and drop it on the ground. Perhaps the ripe plums were too sour for the squirrels, but it used to drive me mad. So wasteful, I would think. But over the years, I moved away from thinking that they were “stealing from my tree” to “why do I think it's my tree anyway?” I didn't even plant it.

My husband has labeled some of them “super squirrels” because they successfully jumped above the collars he installed on the apple trees to protect ‘his’ fruit, an unsuccessful effort. Squirrels definitely won that round.

This summer I gave up on growing a garden. It's not in my heart to kill these animals, and yet, we do need to figure out

a non-lethal solution to protecting the foundation of the house. I don't know what that is yet. I will continue to watch the squirrels to see if I can find any clues.

I still miss the horses. There was something about their presence that was comforting. Maybe because we had horses when I was growing up in Indiana. I also miss the horses because now I am tasked with mowing some of the grass that was growing higher than my knees by late spring.

However, I grew to love my time on the ride-on mower, cutting paths around the perimeter, so Scout and I had a place to walk in the evenings. While out mowing, I found another ecosystem within the tall grass. I spotted moles, frogs, lizards, very young squirrels and ladybugs. I had to go slow, and even then I suspect some creatures did not survive the mowing. We humans have developed so many amazing tools. We are smart, inventive, creative. And yet, oftentimes, we don't consider how we are affecting other animals that live among us. Our everyday actions affect their lives. In this case, horses are a better solution to keep the grass low.

Most of the time, it's easy to coexist with all of these sentient beings. It's even possible to form relationships with some of them. While we have a piece of paper that formally stakes our claim to this land – these twelve acres – do we really own it? Other animals live here too. Is it possible for us to share the land with the wildlife, so that we disrupt the ecosystem as little as possible? ■

Notes

- 1 Do we really *own* animals? I live with two adopted cats and one adopted dog. I consider myself their guardian.

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