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# Wildlife Enemies

By Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci

More and more naturalists are "taking to the woods" to study animals in the wild. Their observations have exploded many myths about wolves, gorillas, otters, and other maligned wildlife "enemies."

When my husband and I first acquired land for a wildlife refuge in New Jersey, my mind was cluttered with misconceptions, some of them planted by naturalists. Although my interest in nature was keen, my observations had been sporadic and were heavily influenced by reading and hearsay. After a few months of careful observation in the refuge, I learned that my eyes often told a different story.

## Red and Gray Squirrels

For example, one naturalist had told me, "Red and gray squirrels cannot tolerate each other. You will never find them in the same woods." I wondered if each species had its own section of the woods, but soon I noticed that red squirrels were everywhere—hunting for cones in the high pine tops, nesting in birdhouses along the path, frisking around the maples and oaks. The red squirrels were even active in the refuge's Squirrel Haven, where the gray squirrels frolicked.

Another naturalist had told me, "The red squirrel is the enemy of the gray." I had a perfect opportunity to test the truth of this statement—with the help of one of my friends at Squirrel Haven. Quizzy, a female red squirrel, had learned to come at my



call and climb on my lap for food. Sitting with Quizzy day after day, I was able to study her relationship with the gray squirrels that nested in the nearby gum trees. When the gray squirrels would come down to eat the corn I scattered, Quizzy would dash at them, chattering and squeaking until they streaked to their home trees. I was amazed at Quizzy's courage, but even more amazed at the flight of the big grays. Their flight seemed to bear out the naturalist's claim that the red squirrel is the enemy of the gray.

Then one day I saw a different picture. Down the trunk of a hollow gum fled Quizzy, with a gray squirrel hot on her heels. Evidently she had trespassed on another's territory, and her self-righteous courage had deserted her.

Helen Hoover, in *The Long-Shadowed Forest*, tells of a man who found a red and a gray squirrel fighting at a nesthole in his garden. He had heard that red squirrels rob nests, so he shot the red one. The gray one ran away. Then the man looked into the nest. Red squirrel babies were there—one dead and another bitten.

Closer to home, I witnessed the "enemy" red and gray living and eating side by side. At the six-foot feeder outside my window, gray squirrels arrived to

feed. A red one came too. At first she chased the gray ones away, but they stubbornly kept returning. At last she tolerated them at the far end of the feeder. Flipping her tail, and now and then scolding, she kept right on eating, while chickadees and nut-hatches flitted down to snatch food from almost under her nose.

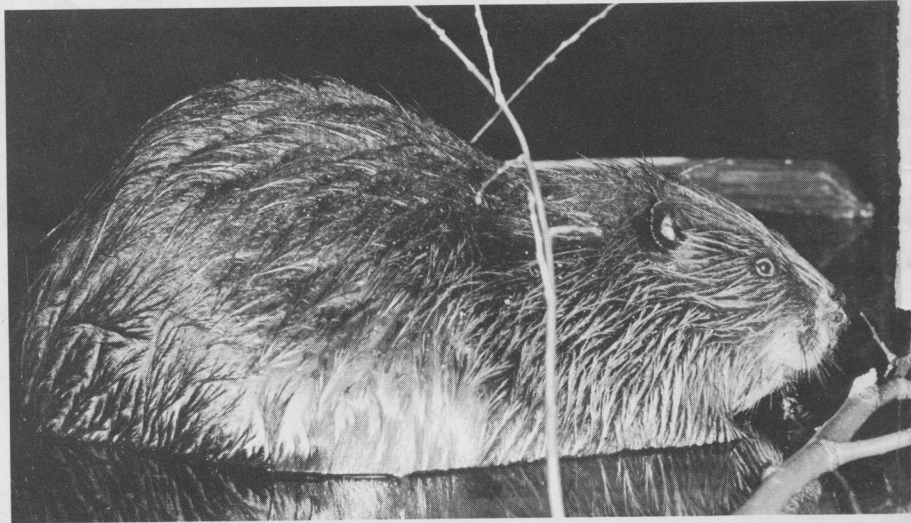
### Are Otters Enemies?

The otter has been accused of being an enemy of fish and the beaver. Yet otters, beavers, and fish for centuries have occupied the same waterways, and all have flourished. Man with his traps has been the immoderate enemy of both otters and beavers. As for damage to fish, who is man with his shoulder-to-shoulder fishing to talk about enemies of fish?

Having heard that otters kill beavers, we consulted Emil Liers, the "Otter Man" of Minnesota. Liers raises otters as pets; he has also studied them extensively in the wild. "Otters that burrow into a beaver lodge are often after crustaceans," he says. "If a beaver is killed by an otter it is the exception to the rule."

Later, my first-hand observations of beavers and otters together confirmed Liers' findings. Not only





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did I watch both species living as close neighbors, often using the same creekside holes for shelter, but young and old passed each other unconcernedly in the narrow stream, where otter pups tried to engage the sober beaver kittens in play. Many times I have watched a lone beaver kitten swim right through a group of otters—parents with their young—with no sign of enmity on the part of either species.

In Poland, where otters were killed to save fish, the fish became sick and died wholesale. Too late it was realized that otters had caught diseased individuals, keeping the stock healthy. And Carl O. Marty, Jr., well-known woodsman of Wisconsin, points out that fishing was better in the early days when otters were plentiful.

### Hearsay vs. Observation

Too often we carelessly jump to conclusions about wildlife. In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on first-hand observation. Naturalists are going out to look for themselves, instead of echoing old tales handed down.

Take wolves, for example. Called "savage creatures" and "grim predators," wolves have long been feared by people who have had no opportunity to understand them. Hunters, who studied wolves along

the sights of a rifle, perpetuated the myths. Then Farley Mowat lived intimately with wolves on the tundra and found them good neighbors. And Cris and Lois Crisler, who studied wolves in the Arctic wilds, found that wolves are the shepherds of the caribou. Wolves are not a menace, they said, but a balance wheel of nature. For one thing, healthy caribou—even calves—could outrun wolves. Wolves "tested" groups of caribou and brought down only those weakened by age, injury, or disease.

Lois Crisler, in her book *Arctic Wild*, describes how the cobwebs of misunderstanding were gradually brushed away. At the start of her wolf-caribou study, she feared wolves and expected that the wolves would attack human beings with provocation. Gradually she began to know and love them, and fear left her. "The wolves, our companions, were more mysterious and wonderful than we had dreamed," she declares.

### A Close Look at Gorillas

Another victim of wild tales has been the gorilla. George B. Schaller, venturing unarmed into the African wilderness to study gorillas, laid to rest the old myth that gorillas are aggressive attackers of man. He found that gorillas are actually amiable vege-

The beaver placidly  
inhabits waters  
frequented by otters.



tarians, that they live at peace with fellow inhabitants of the forest. Gorilla attacks occurred when man was the aggressor and, all retreats being cut off, the gorillas were merely defending themselves.

Obviously, a superficial look, with prejudiced eyes, will no longer do.

### **Ignorance Is Not Bliss**

For centuries, old hunters' and trappers' tales have held sway, and those of us who read and hear, lacking authentic information, have been the victims—along with the animals slaughtered without reason. It is natural—and right, I suppose—to be afraid of the unknown. But for modern man, ignorance is not bliss. Led by open-minded pioneers, we have opened the door of ecology and are discovering that there are no enemies in nature, but only close-fitting components in the great web of life, into which we ourselves are inextricably woven.

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Mrs. Buyukmihci's conservation articles have been widely published in magazines and newspapers all over the United States. In her spare time, she teaches a special course on "Animals and Nature" to groups of New Jersey schoolchildren.

### **Adams Unexpected Wildlife Refuge**

Adams Unexpected Wildlife Refuge comprises about 250 acres of wild land, abandoned cranberry bogs, and woods. The refuge is located in Newfield, N. J., about 60 miles south of Trenton.

Originally started as a haven for bluebirds, Unexpected has become a sanctuary for beavers, otters, deer, foxes, grouse, and a host of other creatures. Last season, four pairs of bluebirds nested at Unexpected. All summer their voices could be heard from every corner of the refuge.

There is no admission fee, and visitors are welcome *by appointment*. For an appointment, write Mrs. Hope Buyukmihci, Adams Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, Newfield, N. J. 08344.

The refuge has no connection with any organization. It is a private effort to save a small population of wildlife and to provide a place where they can be observed at peace in their natural habitat.