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Of Snow Pigs and Elk: From Paonia to Alaska and Back

My grandparents came to Crawford after the turn of the century. My late father, Charles VanDenBerg, left Colorado after World War II to serve his country. He and my mom settled in the Napa Valley in California, where my brother and sister and I grew up. As a child, I always heard about this wonderful, almost mythical place where the elk begged the hunters to shoot them and the native trout jumped into the creel. Our family vacations here were amazing. Even as a child, I wanted to live here when I grew up. It took until I was 57 years old to achieve that dream, after living in Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Alaska. My wife and I now live under these still black nights full of stars and the Milky Way. As I sit writing this, two small bucks are eating the fallen apples from our apple tree.

My father retired when he was 55, moved back to Colorado, and he eventually built the home on Pitkin Mesa, where we now live. My memories of hearing my father talk about hunting here are precious. Of the many deer and elk killed, my father always talked about that one big buck he shot when he was a teen, on top of Saddle Mountain above Crawford. He brought the buck back home on his favorite grey horse, the one horse that never left his mind, even 75 years later.

Each year, Dad would return to California from his annual “Dad only” hunting trip with his brothers and cousins to Curecanti. Sometimes, he came with coolers of venison or elk but always with tales. Although I fish but don’t hunt, my older daughter inherited Grandpa’s elk rifle and used it two years ago to get her first elk. I tell my friends that one does not really know one’s daughter until you see her gut an elk!

I am amazed at the abundance of wildlife here on in the valley. My dad always hated the elk fences and refused to use them on his land, and we now carry on the same tradition. As a result, the elk and deer trek across our land, forming a path they have walked on for decades. The only place I have lived which even remotely compared to here was Alaska. During our years living there, we had many adventures.

The humpback whales were plentiful in the seas around Juneau, where we lived, and fish were present in awesome abundance. One day I was out salmon trolling on the ocean with a friend on his boat. There was a tiny craft about 100 feet off the bow of our boat. Suddenly, two enormous humpback whales surfaced, blew their plumes of spray into the air, and moved directly toward

the small skiff. As the panicked man in the boat frantically tried to pull his fishing lines in, my friend shouted "You catch them, I'll clean them!" The whales dove and all was calm again, except for the glare from the fisherman toward our boat.

I enjoyed the halibut fishing more than any other kind of fishing. Halibut can get to be quite huge, up to 500 pounds or more. I usually fished in more than 200 feet of water. It is a job and a half to crank one of those big flat fish up to the surface. They are not threatening except when they get to the top and start thrashing around. They can break your arm or leg in an flash if you are reckless and bring them onto the boat. I always harpooned them the instant that they surfaced and then let them run off on a rope tied to the harpoon until they settled. It is crude, basic, man against beast fishing, the total opposite of catch and relase genteel fishing, but it is incredibly exciting when those immense shadows come slowly up out of the depths, and one has only seconds to secure them before they escape.

In my home office, I have a photo of a huge grizzly that a friend and co-worker of mine shot one summer. Mike spotted this bear a year before the hunt and was determined to go back in and get it. It was a wet, grey day when he and a friend hiked into the remote area where he had last seen the bear. He is a bowhunter, and his friend had a rifle for back-up. As they came around a small bend in a creek, they saw an enormous mound of dirt that had a large moose leg sticking straight up out of it. A bear frequently will bury it's prey to keep it away from other predators and scavengers. As they approached the mound, a huge angry grizzly, the one Mike had seen before, jumped to the top of the pile of dirt. Mike said that it was roaring and bellowing and standing on it's hind feet. Mike borrowed his friend's rifle to look through the scope at the bear and decided not to risk trying to hit it with the arrow. He shot it and it rolled down the other side, and then leaped back to the top of the mound. Mike tried to put another round in the rifle, and the gun jammed. He grabbed the bow from his friend to get ready for the charge. The bear could have covered the distance between them in seconds, but he had been fatally wounded and rolled off the mound. The bear was one of the largest ever shot in Alaska, and Mike and his friend were lucky to be alive.

The bears really are frightening to see, but rarely bother anyone who does not bother them. One of my geologist friends told me the story of taking a young geologist from California on a mineral-finding expedition into the Brooks Range, to the east of Nome. The young man was hiking ahead of him up a sharp ridge. My friend watched as the other man stuck his head over a rock of the top of the ridge. He found himself staring directly into the face of an enormous blond grizzly, just inches away. Although the bear was as frightened as he was and ran in the other direction, the man fled all the way back to the helicopter, flew directly to Anchorage and left the state never to return. My friend said that the helicopter pilot did not appreciate the strong odor coming from the man's jeans.

Alaska is unique in that it still has a wide range of animals that are extinct or endangered in other places. Some of them are beautiful to see, but others are pests. In particular, we had a problem in Juneau with the wild Arctic snow pigs. They are a small breed of wild pig, pure white in the winter to blend in with the snow, and have very short legs with stocky bodies and round bellies, and are quite aggressive. They normally do not bother people, but those living near cities like Juneau were very hard on pets such as cats or dogs. The snow pigs usually came out at night, and many people never saw them, much like the mountain lions in our country. The pigs have excellent night vision and sit up on the mountain ridges and watch for household pets that are left outside. When they spot a pet, they come down off the mountains on their bellies, sliding at high rates of speed. They grab the helpless pets as they slide by, letting their momentum take them and their prey up the ridges on the opposite sides of the valley. It was very strange to walk around the valley knowing that those snow pigs were up there watching every move we made.

Alaska still has wolves which were long ago hunted out of this area of Colorado. Although I support the protection of wildlife, I think we need to be cautious about reintroducing some of these animals to the area. I admit that the sound of a wolf howling would be almost as wonderful as hearing the sound of the coal train going through the valley at night, but I worry about what the wolves would do to livestock. Colorado also had a species of snow pigs, but apparently they had gone extinct long before the area was settled by pioneers like my grandparents. And now, as many of you know, there is a move to introduce snow pigs back into the area. This would be especially devastating to the cats and dogs of Paonia, with the mountains right above the town. Of course, it may help with our feral cat problem but just think of Fluffy and Fido! I don't want to get overly political, but I hope that we can keep this re-introduction of snow pigs from happening.

I'll never forget a part of a Jack London story that I read when I was a boy. I recollect that it was about an aged trapper that lived in the Yukon wilderness in a little cabin that was covered with snow and ice for many months at a time, while blizzards howled and moaned through the woods. The man lived alone through the long months of almost total darkness that we have in the far north. Someone asked the old man how he stood the loneliness and the intense cold. He replied that every morning when he got out from under the bearskin that he slept under and stoked the wood stove to drive the frosty air from the cabin, he would go over to his one little window and scrape the ice off and gaze out into the cold. He would say to himself "This is the kind of day for me!", no matter how severe the weather or forbidding the darkness. He knew that the key to survival of adversity is within ourselves, and that the key to happiness is right inside us, ready to be used.

My father passed away this last winter at 91 years of age. He loved living here more than imaginable. Now, enjoying the incredible privilege of being a resident of our little valley, I wanted to share these thoughts and memories. This is the kind of place for me, and you are the

kind of neighbors for me! And by the way, there are no such animals as snow pigs, so don't write your Congressman!

John VanDenBerg

(I won \$15 in a local writing contest in my home town with this. Wahoo! A published and paid author!!!!)