

Our Trip Takes Us

By Becky Hirn

Of all the wild and remote places we've visited, I still can't imagine being dropped in the wilderness as in the Discovery television show "Man vs. Wild." I also can't see myself in the primeval world of woolly mammoths and saber tooth tigers as in the books I'm currently reading, Jane Auel's Earth's Children series. While I'm intrigued by the untamed, I just wouldn't survive.

I often read the caution signs regarding native wildlife and the brochures detailing which animals are present. I periodically review the advice given in the "Worst Case Scenario" books. I've learned that during a bear attack, I should play dead and cover my head. To outrun an alligator, I need to run in a zigzag pattern. And three blasts, flares or whistles are the universal sign of distress. I know these things and yet I'd still run from a bear and probably faint if an alligator came at me. I'd end up another victim of natural selection.

Even bison (buffalo) which seem as calm as cows, can be really dangerous. After visiting the National Bison Range in Moiese, Montana, we were well-versed in bison history and behavior. We saw herds of 50 or more grazing the rolling hills. We kept our distance though because you don't want to end up in a stampede. The best bison survival advice: stay at least 75-feet away because they're unpredictable and powerful.

It wasn't until Yellowstone National Park that we got a close look at a lot of wild things. Pulling into our campground, a bison walked right in from of the RV. We watched elk, moose, and coyotes. The wild was everywhere. While driving the park roads, if we saw a car stopped ahead, it was almost always animal related. Once we got stuck in a traffic jam because a wolf was sauntering along Yellowstone River.

Animals weren't the only wild things in Yellowstone. I wasn't prepared for the array of geysers, mud pots and thermal pools in this caldera, or huge basin created by a 640,000-year old volcano. Many of the colorful waters and swirling mud pits look inviting to touch. But the acid in them could burn skin. How could something that looks as blue and bubbly as a hot tub be deadly? The amazing part to me is that the opportunity to see this earth changing spectacle in action is actually pretty rare.

Two-thirds of the world's geysers are concentrated in Yellowstone. Over millions of years, the area became the geological perfect storm of volcanic activity, shifting tectonic plates, high-elevation mountains and glacial ice. And here we get this extraordinary peek into the history of the earth.

So it's no wonder humans are so attracted to wild things. We recognize our own primal behaviors in animals. We see the wild in ourselves and it awakens our natural instincts. Maybe it feels like, evolutionarily speaking, we came from them. Or perhaps watching the earth bubble at this volcanic level, under such precise circumstances, we can see that having human life and the ability to think and use thumbs is a perfect storm too, a real gift.

Becky Hirn is a Delphos resident traveling America with her family for a year. She documents the journey at www.ourtriptakesus.com. Follow the Hirn family in photos, blogs, on Facebook and Twitter. You may e-mail Becky at beckyhirn@ourtriptakesus.com