

**E**verybody wants to see wildlife. Unfortunately, no one has the patience to sit and wait, because that is what it takes. No skill involved. This makes the chance encounters, usually in automobiles, more poignant. Cars are natural "blinds" and make excellent wildlife observatories.

I have a friend who planted a seed in my mind which obviates automobile observations for me. A major goal of his has been to stalk a deer, then touch it. After deer, mountain sheep, elk, wolves; the possibilities are endless.

On a few occasions, half-heartedly, I've tried. Deer are wary creatures and I am impatient. They watch me as I watch them and when I get too close, they wander off a step or so. They always maintain the same safe distance.

In studying Aikido, a martial art, students practice balance, coordination, and presence by training in the dark. The first thing I learned this way is there is an innately known distance between people that will not be violated. It is equivalent to the length of your outstretched arm and your partner's. No matter who I trained with, the moment they entered my "inner sphere," I knew it and instinctually moved to maintain this distance.

It was the same with any deer I tried to sneak up on; they always maintained this sphere of space within which I was not allowed.

I learned a technique from Les Chow, a wildlife biologist with the National Park Service, for approaching large mammals. It's called "looking for your wallet." The procedure is simple and it works pretty well. In a random pattern, head down, eyes on the ground, you wander towards the animals, as if "looking for your wallet." Deer, or mountain sheep, will note your presence but seem to assume you're browsing and let you approach closer than when stalking. It seems to have something to do with eye contact; predators make eye contact.

I've tried this technique and it worked for me. I've yet to touch a deer but I came close to it this summer. Strangely, the closer my approach, the stronger my desire to move away.

I walked into my campsite in Sequoia National Park one day to find two deer licking the coals from the BBQ. They were probably after salt. The campground was nearly empty and deathly silent.

The deer didn't notice me at first. I walked methodically, but silently, towards them. Getting closer, I wished for my camera and began to speculate when the animals would start and walk away. I was within 30 feet when one, a male, looked up at me. I stopped. We stared at each other until I remembered; I began to search the ground for my wallet. Soon, the male looked away and went back to licking the coals.

The other deer was a female. She moved up to the male; they rubbed noses and "kissed." The female ran her tongue over the nose of the male licking charcoal dust. Both their tails twitched at clouds of insects. Their big ears scanned for sounds like radar dishes.

The closer I got, moving in inches now, the more individual characteristics could be discerned. The male had a black blotch on his lower lip; the kind you've seen in certain breeds of dogs. The female had a sparse covering of whiskers on her chin. I estimated we were about ten feet apart. Close enough. Slowly I sank to the ground and sat on my heels. Let them come to me, and then...



To my left I heard the crack of a broken twig. "Whiskers" looked anxiously at the sound and relaxed; it was two more deer come to graze. They were both female and comparing them to Whiskers it was plain she was pregnant. Her belly hung low and was well rounded.

The two new arrivals sampled the coals. "Black Lip" moved in and pushed them aside by kicking at them with his foreleg. Still on my heels I moved, irresistibly, closer. I was beginning to feel part of the group; my presence didn't seem to concern them at all.

The deer seemed larger than life, but, paradoxically, smaller than I expected. They actually looked larger from further away. Maybe that is because it was easy to convince myself they were a different size. When I helped Les dart and tag bears, they always seemed tiny until the sedative wore off and they began to move.

Black Lip yawned, smacked his lips and seemed to enjoy licking the coals as much as kids like ice cream. Whiskers shook her head, scratched, and moved in next to him. He didn't seem to mind having her around. The two other females kept their distance, although one

# Deer Me

By Peter Stekel

showed slight interest in me.

I continued watching the four deer until they began to wander off. They moved to the next campsite to explore. Then, while getting up to move around my camp, the deer stopped to inspect me. They moved in closer.

I watched the deer watch me. In a moment, we couldn't have been more than one arm's length apart. Whiskers, the closest, took a small step towards me and I discreetly moved back. She seemed pleased and looked back over her shoulder at the others. Black Lip nodded his head slightly. Whiskers turned around and joined her friends; together they moved away.

Were they contemplating what it would be like to touch a human?

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