

MOTHER COYOTE

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IT was on a cool windy day last June that I set out to visit a range of low hills about three miles from my home. These hills run for about a mile across an untenanted section of land, too rough and hilly for cultivation. The northern slopes of the hills are densely wooded. I was making for a point near the centre of the section, where I hoped to find some cranberry bushes in flower. It is a remote secluded spot, a full half mile from any road and nearly a mile to the nearest dwelling.

Before beginning ascent of the hill I had selected, I had to cross a chain of small sloughs, surrounded by a dense growth of poplar and willow. One of these bluffs extended for some distance up the hillside. From habit I kept out of sight among the trees, and moved silently on rubber-soled canvass shoes. I broke cover, and not ten yards in front of me lay the largest female coyote it has been my luck to see. She had her back to the westering sun, and was plainly enjoying its pleasant warmth. With forelegs outstretched in front of her and head erect, she was looking intently toward the east, as if expecting something—perhaps the arrival of her mate with food. Beside her was the entrance to the den, and her fur was rubbed and dirty from many entries and exits.

Before this experience, I had hardly thought it possible to take a coyote so completely by surprise. I had approached against the wind, which carried away the scent, and what slight noise I made was no doubt covered by the rustling of leaves. I stood there in the open in full view, trying to be motionless and even to breathe gently. She continued her lookout to the east, quite unaware of my presence.

It was too good to last. Something—scent, sound, or instinct—warned her. Or could it have been just accident? At any rate, she turned her head and looked me straight in the face. Even then, for seconds, she did not get up, nor did her expression change. It seemed

she was so completely confident that no human being would ever disturb her well-chosen solitude, she could not believe her eyes. Then her expression changed from placid composure, first to intense surprise, then to consternation. She stood up, still looking at me with a comical half-incredulous look, as if she thought I might still turn out to be only a bad dream. Then she growled and trotted off a few yards. I advanced a step, whereupon she turned and barked. However, this was only a bit of bold bluffing, for when I kept on advancing, she prudently retreated, but without hurry.

I went up the hill to just beyond the den, and stood there. She went down the hill to the fringe of willow thickets, and disappeared among them. A few moments later she made a tremendous leap vertically upwards out of the bushes, to see what mischief I might be up to. She repeated these leaps every minute or so, shifting her ground a bit between each one.

I took up my station on a hill some 600 yards north-east of the den, and sat down to see what she would do. She followed me, and when I sat down, she sat down to watch me. I ate my lunch, (without which I never embark on a cross-country hike), and then continued eastward for half a mile. Mother coyote followed at a respectful distance. When at length I sat down again, she did the same.

I then turned north into the thick bush on the northern hillsides, and by walking about a mile, roughly in a semi-circle, approached the den from the north through the bush. She was back at the den, but was clearly expecting me this time, and took to the willows as before. I then headed for home, and she followed me for about half a mile.

Next day I went back, hoping that from some vantage point on the hills I might see the pups through my binoculars. But mother coyote was taking no chances. She had removed herself and her family to parts unknown.