

Vineyard Critters
(Number 62 in a series of opinionated articles about grapes and wine)

By John Smith

After twenty years of growing grapes and seventeen years making wine in Fair Play, I've become acquainted with a whole lot more of nature's creatures than I had the chance to meet in all the years leading up to this adventure. Looking back over the encounters and experiences, some of the animals are beautiful, some beneficial, some destructive and some are just plain maddening, but they all enrich this country life we have chosen.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In addition to the insect and fungal pests that threaten the grape crop each year, one of the most frequent natural enemies of the vine is the ever-present deer. Buck, doe or fawn, they regard the bright green shoots on the vines each spring as "deer candy," and will gorge themselves at the expense of a full crop if they're not carefully excluded from the vineyard. It's become known as "warm-up exercises" for the vineyard crew to organize an early morning "deer extraction" on all the fields during late April and early May. After the shoots grow to a couple of feet in length and toughen up, they're no longer as attractive to the deer, and we can relax the immigration policy until harvest time. The few leaves they strip from the mature canes only reduce the workload for the crew at leaf-removal time in July.

No other animal has as great a potential for harm to the grapes, but gophers can destroy young vines by eating the roots out from under them, and cause severe injury to the unobservant grower who steps into one of the holes and sprains an ankle, as I did a few years back. Ground squirrels and moles can wreak visual havoc with a vineyard as they do a lawn, but no serious harm generally occurs. Skunks, especially the one (or the family, they all look alike) who's been living in our barn for the past eight years, have their own special hazard, so when it's time to move the picking bins outside as harvest time approaches, the last remaining few are handled with great care so as not to offend our long-time resident. The crew who live next door to the barn have reached an uneasy peace and now refer to him as "*amigo*."

Others of our visitors are more welcome than these, even though they may pose their own risks. Snakes help control mice and gophers, and as long as they don't invade our interior space like the three-foot diamondback who took refuge under the winery door this spring, they're quite welcome. I had a triple-gopher snake day a few years ago when I first met a four-footer in the driveway (he puffed up, hissed and wiggled his tail to do his best impersonation of a rattler so I'd be properly impressed), then saw a three-footer on the road out front and a two-footer on the floor of the winery laboratory—just about all the snake visitation I needed for one day. Our most recent serpent adventure was an event we held on behalf of a local candidate for County Supervisor, when we had an uninvited guest of a four-foot California kingsnake; the guest of honor had to do removal duties himself (below).



Ray Nutting subdues unwelcome guest

While the small brown fence lizards that play hide-and-seek with you are everywhere outside, alligator lizards are welcome indoor visitors to the winery since they eat spiders, including black widows. Our favorite amphibian is a small frog (species unknown) we call our “mascot” who resides in our inside drain. He’s only half an inch long, but with the resonance of a thirty-foot drain, he sounds like a huge bullfrog!

Feathered Friends

I wrote a few years back on the exceptional measures taken by grape growers to prevent bird depredation of a young vineyard, but the majority of the birds do little harm and many provide entertainment and a helpful presence. For years, we’ve had a family of red-tailed hawks who raise their young in the nearby woods, and who spend the late spring and early summer teaching their offspring the fine points of hunting for food. Unfortunately, just like young humans, the juvenile hawks never know when to shut up, and their continuous screeches can get on your nerves after a while. When fully fledged, they pay us back by consuming the surplus ground squirrels and snakes.

Although we love to watch our quail, each adult with a covey of miniatures scurrying behind them up the road in the good years, they can also serve as tasty snacks for our resident Cooper’s hawk, who patrols the vineyard and helps prevent theft by his cousins when the grapes are ripe. One day, there was even a report of a bald eagle taking a rest in the vines of Lemley Ranch, but he hasn’t been seen since

that one appearance. Much less welcome are the woodpeckers, especially the aggressive flickers. Not only do they “drum” on rain gutters in the spring (only the males, since like humans, they seem to be convinced that females are attracted to the most boisterous guy in town), but they also dug multiple nesting holes in the trim boards of our new house within weeks of its completion. All woodpeckers, like all hawks, are protected by federal law, so instead of shooting them the exclusion process involved nailing hardware cloth over the holes while they were out foraging during the day. Turkey vultures are daily

visitors to almost every property, but my most memorable bird sighting was in 2004, watching a pair of locally rare black vultures soaring over the newly-planted vines around the Obscurity Winery building.

A few years ago, from our porch, we could hear a short, shrill cry that sounded more like a monkey than a bird, but a neighbor tipped us to the fact that a pet peacock had escaped and was living in the nearby area. As pretty as they are to look at, they have one of the more raucous calls in the entire bird family. Turkeys are in abundance after what seemed like a slow start about fifteen years ago, and one really entertaining encounter was during harvest, when I drove the truck by a pair of toms in full display on opposite sides of a wire fence. When I came back past the same spot several hours later with a full load of grapes, neither one had backed down and they were still locked in position (yup, two more guys without a clue). Hopefully, nightfall ended the standoff and let them rest their tired wings.

Snoop Dogs

Two of the noisier animals are coyotes, who can never resist a four-a.m. group chorus of yipping and howling to celebrate catching a rabbit (or maybe a neighbor's cat), and our local fox, who makes her entrance every evening, barking loudly enough to scare away any prey she might be seeking. It seems strange to give that much warning, but maybe it's actually just a "he" behaving badly. Our resident coyotes and foxes are also prone to leaving presents of their droppings on rocks, roads and every flat surface, so others will know the extent of their territory. On a couple of occasions, we've even had a resident bobcat, who competed with the coyotes to reduce the local population of jack rabbits to almost zero. Raccoons and grey squirrels are always in abundance, known mostly for their suicidal tendencies on local roads.

Big Game

Although we've never seen them out in the open here, we've had evidence of both mountain lions and bears in the area, and as long as we're not on the prey list, that's all right. Like us, they're part of nature's grand plan and their frightening if unseen presence adds to the thrills of living in a rural area surrounded by vines, woods and creatures with whom we hope to coexist peacefully for as long as we can stay..