

29SHORTGRASS.doc

*Portions of the following story contain imaginary and fictitious events and characters. If or should such departures from the truth offend the reader, the author wishes he could offer protection from all the insults and offenses to human dignity and decent values rampant on the surface of this cold earth, but he cannot without discovering an honest way to make a living.*

Best way to start is to find where the main park road in the Petrified Forest National Park comes in from the south to pass under I-40 west of Holbrook, Arizona. My pal has walked up on a rise to look at ancient ruins. A Chihuahua raven watches me eat two slices of whole wheat bread mashed together over a cheese omelet snatched from a motel's breakfast bar.

You have to be around Chihuahua ravens to appreciate the word scoundrel. He can't believe he isn't going to share the sandwich. Nothing resembles these black outlaws in the natural or unnatural world. One raven in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for example, winters on a Kentucky Fried Chicken house, right over the exhaust pipe.

Here's the deal: About two miles and 20 minutes ago, on a high point, we watched a coyote come down a side road. He paused and voided on the stop sign's post. Never

scratched on the hard surface or paused further before trotting on east toward New Mexico.

Magnification under 50X binocular showed the coyote's fur to be rich and in fine gold colors. The intense desert heat dried the puddle too fast to determine the urine's color. A trapper once said, "The more 'yeller' the urine, the closer the wolf is to breeding time." (Exempt trappers from the above opening. It'd hurt their feelings.)

The raven cocks his head, flies around to perch on the rock wall I sit upon. Before I do, he spots the park ranger pulling up to reserved parking. She puts on her hat. She comes our way.

Ranger: "Sir, do not feed birds on federal lands. The raven by you is a spoiled beggar."

Me: "Where I come from, Ma'am, ravens peck baby lambs' eyes out on dry springs. Don't eat 'em, they just leave 'em to starve, blinded and pitiful sights for us to put out of their misery."

Ranger: "Park regulations forbid visitors performing any act to alter or shorten the lifespan of an animal under section 118. On federal lands, be warned you do not have the right in any way to injure the raven in question. We only allow desert sheep on the park – not domestic sheep."

Me: "Yeah, we learned that when Uncle Goat Whiskers and ol' Doug Poage ran an outfit against the forest in New Mexico. The old man who owned the ranch previous knew the trick to summering sheep in the forest, but they never did catch on how to get along with the rangers. Involved whiskey, but Whiskers and Doug never knew how much whiskey."

Ranger: "Consumption of beverage alcohol is forbidden in this park. Is Uncle Goat Whiskers a Native American name? If he is N.A., and he is your uncle, you have certain privileges under Section 28 on entrance fees." (The raven has moved to face toward the ranger.)

Me: "Naw, Uncle Whiskers claimed he was a superior being. Wish you could have seen him storm in the La Fonda Hotel lobby in Santa Fe with his pants stuffed into 14-inch top black boots and his white mustache bristled as a javelin's jaw locks." (Appreciate that I always talk to officers like corn shucks are my family's crest.)

Ranger: "Racial discrimination violates rule 87. Please give a clearer definition for the term 'superior being.' Further, your speech defect entitles you to a translator."

Me: "Superior being means Uncle Goat Whiskers was a bigot. Sorry about my drawl. My tongue was burned in an accident. Listen closer and you will catch on."

From this point, the story changes from dialogue to the report given the ranger. My pal was due back any minute so I needed to be quick. Keep in mind also that Chihuahua ravens can talk if their tongues are fixed someway or the other. That might explain why he was a good listener.

So I told the ranger about seeing the coyote down at the stop sign. I further advised her not to bother to try to trap him or make any "sets," because unless a male sprinkles urine around, he is passing through the country instead of leaving a love message for a bitch coyote.

Her mind became easy to read. Utter disbelief is a precise, indisputable diagnosis. She tried to concentrate. The raven turned into the winds to ruffle his feathers and cool his black body. Held his space on the bench, wary yet fascinated.

Disarmed, she asked: "Mister, what's your game? You nuts?"

The crunch of my pal's footsteps hastened my reply: "Yes ma'am, I am nuts. I raise food for human beings ..."