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One of the more prominent shortgrass horse and mule doctors, pursuing a side practice of hollow horns and lap dogs, was telling a friend the other day how many foxes and coons are catching rabies this spring. His purpose being to remind his two-legged clients not to be doctoring his four-legged patients until they studied the symptoms.

He said the sheriff in one outpost had shot several rabid varmints on the town site, risking not only being bitten, but being attacked by an animal rightist opposed to killing fox and coons. Sounded like to be politically safe, the sheriff was going to have to wait for a doctor's diagnosis before shooting mad dogs, or foxes lying around in alleys slobbering and fighting their shadow.

The Sunday after hearing the story, the same friend and myself took a picnic lunch down to the head of Spring Creek. We live on ranches; we know about rattlesnakes and rabies epidemics. Our pickups are always equipped with flashlights, tire tools, and spare tires; yet rare is the occasion either one of us carries a .410 shotgun or a .22 rifle behind the seat.

Of all people, I should pack a gun even if it won't shoot. On trips, I tell city folks we ranchers are desperate gunmen, how we empty our guns into ever tree full of song birds we see. Works better than telling the truth. Like Andrew Johnson, or maybe it was Andrew Jackson, said: "Butter is easier to find on the top of a biscuit than

underneath the crust." Again, maybe the saying came from the Good Book instead of the White House. Lots of things politicians say even up to this day are hard to trace.

We took our time reaching the water's edge. Several limestone outcrops along the trail could be snake dens. Just as we descended, my friend said, "that bird is acting funny." Then, "Watch out, Monte, a sick fox is coming down the bluff!"

Right close, the flow from the springs had cut off a solid rock island four feet from our side of the river. By the time the fox stopped in on the ledge 20 steps away, we had taken a short run and jumped over on the island, landing without a stick or a rock to defend ourselves.

One name for rabies is hydrophobia. We theorized he wasn't going to come to water. (Rabid animals can't drink, I'm told.) The fox looked our way, yet showed no signs of fear or recognition. He stood for a long time, licking a rock and emitting a woeful cry before he started up river toward the pickup. I hadn't noticed before, but when you stand real still and hold your breath, quartz movement watches stop running. Mine was short 17 minutes the next checkpoint.

After he disappeared, we stockpiled rocks and broke off a limb for protection. Water bubbled from the springs and rushed down the rock channel. High on the bluffs, kid goats played and loosened pebbles to shatter downside. Clouds rolled out long white streamers heralding a weather change.

Indians told the Spanish explorers that wolves dragged people underneath the very banks below us. Perhaps the red man took refuge from the wolves right on the huge rock we were sitting on among the holes where the tribes ground mesquite beans to make a crude flour.

The Spanish were thorough bureaucrats. The Catholic priest along on the expedition named every camp and made three hand-scribed copies of his descriptions. (Keep in mind the Father didn't have a briefcase or a laptop.) This camp was called "Los Ojos de Los Lobos" or "The Springs of the Wolves." The good Father wrote, "There is adequate timber to repair cart wheels, abundant grapes and lots of wild hens(turkeys)."

The rattle of a kingfisher perched in a tall pecan broke our reverie. He kept returning to the same branch. Once again the anguished cry of the fox carried over the water. The kingfisher flew over down river to dip for a minnow, only to fly back to rattle his call.

One trail ran right under the big pecan tree where the kingfisher was calling. The other trail had the advantage of being a gravel bar. I figured if the fox took after us in all that loose rock, we'd throw so much gravel in his face, he'd give up.

Darkness was two hours away. We distracted ourselves clipping watercress. The winds changed to the north, pulling the kingfisher farther upstream. The fox's cries grew weaker

and then faded. Without plan or debate, we chose an upper trail and ran for the pickup.

The sheriffs and the activists are going to have settle their own battles. It's not my business to protect school kids, or to decide when to kill wild animals. But they'd better leave kingfishers alone. Next time it comes up for a vote, I think kingfishers, especially Spring Creek kingfishers, should be the state bird ...