

## **A Walk in the Woods - June 2011**

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While camping in northern Maine a few years back, my wife witnessed one of nature's wonders when she was quite literally confronted by a raging ruffed grouse. According to her the bird was hissing, spitting and had fangs and leg muscles; it attacked with no mercy. Luckily Jewel, our former black lab, (in her prime at the time) finally arrived on the scene in full flight mode and chased the marauding grouse off.

Sounds like something out of a sci-fi movie? Actually it's not and my wife's story was very true, albeit just a touch embellished. This grouse was putting on a performance to defend her chicks and the month of June is the perfect time to be in the woods to witness such an event (if you can tolerate this year's mosquitoes).

Wildlife of all size and stature employ a vast array of defense mechanisms to either ward off or draw away intruders from their young and most of the displays are quite impressive. The most common trick of all is the broken wing trick which is performed by grouse and turkeys. In this case the mother bird does everything she can to get the attention of the intruder by faking a broken wing. As the intruder approaches, the mother bird will drag her wing and carry on, but always staying a safe distance away. When the mother has drawn the intruder sufficiently far from her brood she will blast off and eventually return to her chicks.

Some of us have witnessed this trick and might wonder if it actually works. Humans of course have no interest chasing the mother bird, but dogs are a different matter. I have never seen a dog not sucker for this trick and it is quite a show to watch. The mother grouse wins every time and the dog usually ends up doing a fruitless 200 yard dash through the woods. Walker, our black lab, suckered for that trick the other day for the first time so I'm glad he's faithfully following in the footsteps of his predecessors (maybe it's a black lab thing).

If the broken wing trick does not work, the mother grouse will puff up her feathers and start hissing, approaching the intruder, prepared to fight. This is the act my wife witnessed and it is quite an intimidating act for a one pound bird.

With larger animals, a full frontal assault is the defense of choice. I have been confronted by a mother deer that was highly agitated by my presence and I have heard of dogs being attacked by mother deer. Goshawks really put on the war paint to defend their nests and I have been attacked on numerous occasions. One of the goshawks that attacked me swooped and made full contact with my mountain bike helmet. You really haven't seen fury until you upset mom! I learned this a long time ago but thought I had gotten away from such concerns.

It is a wonderful time of year to be in the woods, the birds are singing and life is in full swing, but some caution should be exercised. If you encounter any animal defending its young the best thing to do is give mom some space and leave the area. She has enough to worry about without you around. Of course some moms such as goshawks, bears and moose will make darn sure you leave the area.

Wild babies are cute, but give them space and when it comes to bears and moose give them lots of space. I have never had an unpleasant bear encounter but I have seen the cubs up close and made a hasty departure. Moose on the other hand, that is a different matter. Bull moose are big and unpredictable, but mother moose will defend their young with unimaginable aggression. Suffice it to say if you encounter a mother moose or bear, enjoy the moment, give them space and leave them to their business.