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Stories from Afield

Bruce L. Smith

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STORIES **FROM** **AFIELD**

Adventures with Wild
Things in Wild Places

BRUCE L. SMITH

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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Designed and set in Scala by L. Auten.

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For Diana and my sisters, Norma and Sandy

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Introduction

Some people just know at an early age what they want to do for the rest of their lives. It helps if you have a role model, maybe an influential teacher or relative, or are presented plenty of opportunities to explore life's possibilities. In my case, I think my lightning rod was my parents' decision to move to the country the summer I turned seven. It was that place that lit the fire. A wondrous mix of woodland, lake, and marsh where I had room to roam and the freedom to explore all that my new environment offered. An additional ingredient that can't be overstated is curiosity. That may be the one intangible that must come from within. It's also what has fueled my fascination with nature to the present.

So I consider myself one of the fortunate. I leveraged my childhood passion into a career as a wildlife biologist—an ongoing adventure living and working with nearly all the large mammal species of the western United States and in some of its grandest wildlands. From a life intertwined with wild things and wild places, I've drawn the following collection of stories. They begin with a childhood encounter with a monster snapping turtle and move on to finding my way from Michigan to the Rocky Mountain West and include an assortment of experiences I recount as a hunter, naturalist, and scientist pursuing birds and bears and elk and mountain goats.

I share these stories in hopes that you will experience some of the same joy, wonder, and drama I felt at those times. Along the way, you may discover a deeper connection and greater purpose in conserving the rich wild heritage we all share. And if the humor in humankind's frailty and unease amid wild nature amuses you, as it does me, so much the better.

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ONE

SNOWBOUND

Statistics are no substitute for judgment.

—Henry Clay

Long, cobalt silhouettes of junipers slipped beneath, as we chased our shadow across the dissected sagelands. An immature golden eagle sporting white-banded tail feathers, the decorative plumes prized by Plains Indians, streaked past the helicopter's left door. Dense, still air made for ideal flying conditions. It was a great day to be alive, soaring with the eagle.

Our pilot, John, guided the Hiller 12E around the east flank of Black Mountain. The peak's 10,087-foot, fir-cloaked hulk dominated the skyline. Behind Black Mountain lay Crow Creek basin, a pretty, willow-lined stream nestled between 11,000- to 12,000-foot-high Black Ridge on the west and Trail Ridge on the east. These joined to the north, forming an elongated horseshoe that fed Crow Creek's waters 2,000 to 3,000 feet below.

Our mission on this subzero morning in January 1980 was to survey elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep in the Owl Creek Mountains of Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming. Along to help me was Rawley Friday. Rawley was Arapaho and a tribal game warden at the Wind River. About my height but stockier, he could handle himself. I liked flying with Rawley. He was devoted to the reservation's wildlife and a jovial companion

on surveys; and he owned an iron stomach, something others I'd flown with didn't possess.

The prototype of the rotary-wing aircraft carrying us was built in 1944 by helicopter pioneer Stanley Hiller at the age of eighteen. Hiller Helicopters' first production aircraft, the Hiller UH12, first flew in 1948, the year I was born. By 1965 more than 2,300 were built for commercial and military use. The next rerun of *M.A.S.H.* you watch, look closely at the choppers used for medevac or to transport Hawkeye from the 4077 in the series finale. They are UH12s, first purchased by the military in 1950 as H-23 Ravens.

Like all reciprocating-engine craft, increasing altitude hampers performance. Our Hiller was equipped with a Soloy turbine conversion to ameliorate that limitation. The one drawback was the turbine's increased thirst for fuel, giving us only two to two and a half hours aloft per fill-up. We carefully planned the day's work with that in mind.

It was now midmorning. Nearly two hours had elapsed since Rawley and I met at the Thermopolis airport where our survey began. We'd already recorded 129 mule deer and almost 200 elk across the eastern three-fourths of the sixty-mile-long Owl Creek Range—improved numbers for that area compared to previous winters' counts. The high country loomed ahead.

In search of bighorn sheep along Trail and Black Ridges, we'd be operating at our highest altitudes on this final leg of the morning's flight. Unlike sheep in the reservation's Wind River Range to the southwest, which migrate to lower-elevation cliffs in winter, bighorns here wintered along wind-scoured ridgetops and escarpments. We carried another forty gallons of fuel in five-gallon jerricans in the Hiller's twin cargo baskets—one mounted on the skid beside each door. The additional weight would reduce performance at high altitudes, acting like ballast on a submarine, but avert a gas-guzzling ferry to refuel in Thermopolis. This dance of performance versus mission time vexes

all remote mountain flights. But as one pilot told me, noting that far too many aviation accidents are caused by running out of fuel, “The only time there’s too much fuel on a helicopter is when it’s on fire.”

The fuel gauge registered one-quarter full, as John throttled the Hiller toward Trail Ridge. We’d land on the ridgetop high above, refuel with the jerricans, and begin our hunt for bighorns.

As we approached Trail Ridge, John unexpectedly settled the Hiller in a foot of snow on the Crow Creek Road. His voice was tinged with concern as he said, “I want to check on something.” Noting our probing expressions, he added, “I smelled something.”

Weird sounds, vibrations, and smells can be telltale signs of trouble to a helicopter pilot, like the tingling sensation I’d felt in the Wind Rivers before lightning struck far too close. I’d not flown with John before, but this attention to detail eased my usual concern about new pilots. Other than being an oversized load for a chopper to lift at six foot three, John seemed competent at the controls. Without shutting the engine down, he climbed out through the flimsy, acrylic door and examined the Hiller’s mechanics. In minutes, he was buckling into his shoulder harness, informing his onlooking passengers, “False alarm. Everything’s okay.” Rawley and I shared relieved looks. “Good,” I said as the engine whined and snow whipped like meringue around the ship. “The closest service station’s two days’ hike from here.”

As the Hiller whooshed forward, Rawley and I resumed scanning for big critters or their recent passage from telltale tracks. It was midwinter. A storm had dumped fresh snow—conditions that maximized visibility of game and covered old animal tracks. Any new ones would likely lead us to whatever animals made them.

The Hiller strained and shuddered upward into a world above ten thousand feet that was snowbound, except for stunted treetops, cliffs, and shreds of windblown ridge. This was the

windiest area of the reservation. Funneling eastward off the Continental Divide through the Wind River valley, winds howled unobstructed before encountering Black Ridge. On windward slopes and ridgetops, velocities could be brutal. On the leeward flanks, turbulence was particularly dangerous, sometimes insane. In sum, advancing weather fronts made surveying game impossible. Today, high pressure had settled over Wyoming, bringing favorable conditions. Yet John was busy at the foot pedals adjusting for the swirling gusts that yanked the tail boom left then right.

We intended to refuel along the crest of Trail Ridge near Monument Peak, at whatever spot offered a level landing site. The upsurge in wind now threatened that design. A misstep along the ridge's narrow spine could make for an untidy landing. A rogue downdraft or wind shear could prove disastrous. John nudged the Hiller up the west side of Trail Ridge. The ship sailed skyward on updrafts and then yawed sideways as the air settled beneath the rotary wing and buffeted the fuselage. Gaining the ridgetop, the Hiller suddenly banked west across Crow Creek basin. "Thwack, thwack, thwack!" Through the noise-dampening padding of my flight helmet, the main rotor pounded like a jackhammer.

Sensing our intense stares, John announced, "We better look for a landing site somewhere below the ridgetop. Somewhere the winds are more manageable than up here."

The other option, descending more than two thousand feet to Crow Creek to refuel, would cost us precious fuel to regain our eleven-thousand-foot altitude. Neither John nor I wanted to do that. We circled back and scanned the bleak landscape below the ridge crest.

"Maybe there!" John jutted his chin forward.

Rawley and I peered in that direction and back at John's eyes for confirmation. "That spot?" Rawley questioned.