

Animals in Their World

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Photos: C. Holdrege

WHEN YOU VISIT the northern area of Yellowstone National Park in June, you encounter an island of wildlife that provides a glimpse into the wealth of animal life that once spread over vast areas of the continent. Henrike and I spent eight days there, hiking and observing plants and animals. We saw bison, elk, moose, deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, bears, and coyotes. We didn't see any of the wolf packs, although some avid nature lovers were observing them at great distances through their spotting scopes. We encountered nests of peregrine falcons, bald eagles, and golden eagles. We even came face to face with a badger as we hiked down a trail — it emerged from its den, looking at us with a piercing gaze.

I share here only our experiences of the bighorn sheep. We were at an overlook that lets you peer down into the gorge of the Yellowstone River, which was rushing along, full with spring meltwater. On the opposite side you look onto a nearly vertical wall of basalt and the gradually eroding, but very steep incline of ancient lava. Some trees grow on these steep canyon walls, but very little herbaceous vegetation.

After a while, we noticed that there were animals on those cliff sides. They were female bighorn sheep (ewes) and their young lambs. Do not picture domestic sheep. The ewes were sleek and fairly short-haired, and resemble domestic goats more than sheep. The lambs were grey and had long, spindly legs. In coloration the sheep blend well with their rocky ground. The ewes moved slowly among the rock-strewn walls — walls on which, as a human being, I would certainly want to be roped in and secured — and they fed occasionally on the sparse vegetation. They often paid little attention to their lambs, which were frolicking around on the inclines as though there were no deadly chasm to plunge into. The lambs jumped from rock to rock, ran after one another, sometimes

kicked up rocks that bounded down into the river far below.

These bighorn sheep inhabit a remarkably inhospitable environment — and yet, it is their home, their place. Inhospitable means inhospitable for us human beings. It was so vividly clear that they live in a different world, not only in terms of the outer environment, but also in the way they are part of that environment. They are not worrying about falling; the ewes are not agonizing over the wild behavior of their lambs; they are not concerned at how sparse the vegetation is; they are not planning ahead to decide where to spend the night. They live embedded in this “harsh” environment as an extension of their being. They are at home.

On this trip, while observing so many different animals, such different ways of being and ways of relating to the surroundings, I had the growing sense that I don’t really fathom what it is to be animal — to be so integrally entwined with one’s world. We have kinship as ensouled beings, but I’m the one observing them and thinking about their characteristics. I can appreciate their existence and, in fact, I’m in awe of them. This connects me with them and at the same time makes me realize how different I am.

