

Your Lands, Your Wildlife

Your Lands, Your Wildlife, Your Story Contest

WILDLIFE WATCHING / PHOTOGRAPHY

Submitted by Jill Bartelt - Kewanee, Illinois



Seeing animals in the wilderness often requires the simple good fortune of being in the right place at the right time. As a young girl, I had the distinct advantage of living in southwestern Montana, north of the aptly named Paradise Valley. No matter which of the local trails my family chose to hike on a given day, we were guaranteed to encounter pikas chirping in a boulder field, bighorn sheep clustered on a hillside or even a distant grizzly bear. In fact, I didn't even have to leave my street: Each year hundreds of elk drifted down from the mountains to pasture in a field across from my house.

It was paradise indeed for a little girl in love with animals. Nothing, however, left as deep an impression as the breathless hour my dad, grandma and I spent one day in the Bureau of Land Management's Bear Trap Canyon (Dillon Field Office). Our trail followed the course of a rocky stream bordered by steep canyon walls. As we paused for a moment to rest and take in the scenery, five or six shapes separated from the rushing water. They were sleek, slender and silvery-brown wild river otters – a whole family of them!

We watched, entranced, as they rippled out of the water, only to turn, slide back in, and ride the river's current. They never stopped moving in and out of the water, playing with a tireless exuberance that even I (a 4-year-old at the time) could not have equaled. I laughed, and it seemed to me that the otters did as well, their sunny nature perfectly matching the sunny day.

As it turns out, even in southwestern Montana, luck is not infinite: That day was the first and only time I have ever seen river otters in the wild. Nevertheless, that one experience filled me with a sense of delight as vivid now as it was 25 years ago. I wish that everyone – especially those who believe that humans are the only animals capable of experiencing fun, joy or a true sense of play – could have the opportunity to spend an hour with otters in their natural environment as I did that day in Bear Trap Canyon.