

THE COATI ENCOUNTER, OR Una Aventura Con Pizotes

By Norm (Mick) Meader, March 2000

On the weekend of March 4-5, 2000, Richard Holmes and I visited our friend Judith McBride and the Cascabel Quakers in the San Pedro Valley north of Benson and went for a hike on Saguaro-Juniper land in Hot Springs Wash. We started our hike from the windmill at the end of the road in the wash, with my goal being to reach the perennial water farther up the valley to the east. We hiked together to where the fence bounding Saguaro-Juniper deeded land crosses the wash below the “rabbit ears cactus,” where I left Richard and continued upstream. About two-thirds of a mile up the valley I intersected flowing water, and I then followed the stream up the wash to the outcrops of yellow volcanic rock that reach down to the streambed. After exploring the lower end of the canyon narrows, I decided to walk down the stream to find where the water finally disappeared beneath the sand and gravel.

When I reached the end of the water, about one-half mile upstream from the rabbit ears cactus, I stopped momentarily, and looking down the wash to the west, I saw a swarm of small furry creatures approximately 50-75 yards away approaching me, which I quickly recognized as a band of coatis. They were spread out across the wash bottom, which was about 25 feet across at that point, and they were weaving back and forth amongst each other as they came my way. Realizing that some kind of encounter between us was going to occur, I froze and stood perfectly still. A rather strong breeze was blowing toward me, so I was downwind of them and they could not catch my scent. As they approached, I counted between 30 and 35 individuals in the group.

To my great surprise and astonishment, the group kept coming toward me without hesitation or apparent awareness that I was there until they surrounded me, some of them approaching within 5 feet, at which point they started drinking from the stream—they were all very thirsty and single-mindedly focused on finding water. They were oblivious to my presence, even though they were within a few feet of me.

Finding myself in the midst of this furry horde, I remained motionless and watched them drink. They were quiet with each other the entire time—as they walked toward me, while they were drinking, and as they left. The first half of the group, being upstream from the second half where the water was more plentiful, sated its thirst first, and as they finished, some of them finally appeared to realize what I was, and a momentary start rippled through that half of the group.

The second half of the group, however, did not notice this and kept drinking. As the first half climbed out the south side of the wash, the second half moved upstream to reach the more plentiful supply of water. When they finished, they, too, finally seemed to become aware of me, and a momentary start rippled through them as well. They did not run from me, however, but slowly walked off, following the remainder of the group.

The last coati to leave was a larger one and was drinking about 4 feet to my left. As she drank (this was a group of cubs with their mothers), I looked at her directly in the eyes, and she

returned the gaze. As we stood looking at each other, she drank unhurriedly until she had quenched her thirst, and then she turned and sauntered off, bringing up the rear of the group as they continued up the wash toward the yellow volcanic cliffs where I had been earlier.

In watching these creatures and thinking about the experience afterward, I felt that they and I were equal beings and that I was no more important in the scheme of things than they were. It was apparent that the coati with whom I shared the gaze trusted me not to harm her or do anything unexpected. We seemed to be friends who, for a moment at least, were sharing our brief lives together, understanding each other's need for the land with mutual understanding and respect.

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About the author

Mick (or Norm) Meader was born and raised in Iowa and came to Arizona in 1974 to work on his M.S. in geology. He later returned to Tucson and was a staff member in Geosciences at the University of Arizona for 23 years, retiring in 2010. Mick met Richard Holmes in 1987 and they were together for 15 years before Richard's death. In 1997 he and Richard became members of the Saguaro-Juniper Corporation, and he became a Cascabel landowner in 2006.

About the people in the story

Richard Holmes was Mick's partner and passed away in 2003. Although not particularly religious, he was a life-long devotee of Quaker principles and made them a foundation of his life. Richard worked with the Tree-Ring Laboratory at the University of Arizona for 33 years and was the master programmer for the science of dendrochronology.

Judith McBride was a long-time Cascabel resident and member of Saguaro Juniper who passed away on August 24, 2014 in Tucson. She met Jim and Pat Corbett through her participation in the Sanctuary Movement in the late 1980's, both in Arizona and at her Quaker meeting in Hartford, Connecticut. Judith learned about Saguaro Juniper through the Corbetts and relocated to Cascabel in 1992. She was a retired professor of philosophy at Connecticut State University and a life-long devotee of social justice.