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# A desert walk reveals playful activities

by Penny Cox

Looking out over the browning desert as it adjusts to the summer heat – jojoba leaves turn inward, bursage bushes drop all their sharp little burrs (so aptly named), Palo Verde trees drop their whitened beans and saguaros hold out with few waxy white blossoms, before following with the welcome sweet, red fruits – it is hard to believe the lively animal activities taking place daily on the desert floor.

Along with the constant activities necessary for survival, there is humor and amusement in some of these efforts provided in the process.

Take for instance the wily coyote, alternately revered and reviled, but always to be admired for his ability to survive man's encroachment on his territory.

While taking a walk with my constant companion, Monty (a bearded collie) whose nose 'sees' better than his eyes, along our favorite trail very early one morning, he signaled that 'animal' was close at hand. With tail up and nose down, he was off casting for the scent, circling bushes and cactus with mounting excitement.

Looking ahead, I spotted our friend coyote off in the distance. His ears alert, he stood quietly among the bushes watching my dog trying to find him.

Far from being scared, he seemed to be enjoying the chase and he even yipped at him to get his attention.

When finally Monty spotted him, coyote took off at an easy lope swinging around bushes, zig-zagging until he was behind Monty.

A couple of these maneuvers had Monty completely frustrated until he just sat down in disgust and watched coyote disappear into his desert.

Then, there is another notorious desert ravager, the rock squirrel – no respecter of human's efforts to maintain a garden of anything but desert plants (perhaps this is telling us something?). This matriarch shall always have my eternal thanks and admiration.

Well, Black Bart (the rock squirrel, of course) has resided under my storage shed for many years, bringing up five or more progeny every year, in spite of my efforts with mercy traps to eliminate him and his young by transporting them to distant places.

However, he has become my other 'watch dog' against Reggie's yearly appearance (Reggie who? A very large rattlesnake, of course).

Reggie likes to curl up in the shade just above the squirrel's hole. Naturally, Black Bart resents this close proximity and, with the help of one of his offspring, starts to harass Reggie by circling around him – always at a respectful distance, bunting, and I swear I

could hear those dirty words directed without any response to this awesome species, just those cold eyes watching.

Finally, when all else failed, Black Bart brought out the ace in his bag of tricks – he flicked dirt into Reggie's eyes.

Without eyelids to blink, the snake finally had to give up his quiet siesta. He uncoiled and slowly oozed away into the bushes, followed by a defiant Bart, shaking his tail in a final gesture that surely said, "And don't come back."

Space does not allow for further desert 'incidents'. But for those of you who have recently moved out to our desert area and even for those who have lived here for some time, I urge you to make time to walk. Walk in the early morning (it's cool) or sunset time when the washes are cooling off.

You, too, can experience a desert 'happening' – it beats television, and you might have a greater appreciation of the need to let the desert be.



COYOTE

*Canis Latrans*