

# First Person



## Animal Invasion

What one Manhattanite has learned from the country creatures inhabiting his summer cabin in Woodstock

By Randy Burgess

One of the most beautiful, yet frightening, short stories I've ever read is just a few pages long. "House Taken Over," by the Mexican writer Julio Cortázar, tells of a brother and sister living together peacefully in their home after their parents die — and then the house is taken over by unknown and angry spirits. We never see the spirits, but the brother evidently knows just how dangerous they are.

One by one, rooms are rendered off-limits as the spirits spread, until at the end, brother and sister flee altogether, with the brother locking the front door and throwing away the key — not to guard what's no longer their property except in name only, but to protect any poor fool of a burglar from being tempted to enter a seemingly empty house.

I was thinking of the story the other day when I considered how thoroughly creatures other than us take over our cabin each summer, here on a wooded hillside in Woodstock.

The cabin, named Quartette, was built at the turn of the last century as part of a failed utopian crafts colony. It was originally four square rooms in a row, each exiting to the

outdoors but not connecting to the others: monastic cells, but for potters or weavers. Since then, the rooms have been connected and upgraded with plumbing, electricity, propane and, most importantly, screens for the windows and doors. Yet Quartette retains much of its original spirit — not least, an amazing porosity not just to the tone of the weather, but to animal and insect life.

The porosity ranges from the acoustic to the literal, sometimes both together. We can, for example, hear the carpenter bees chewing the eaves into sawdust, or buzzing like angry tuning forks as they enter their burrows inside the cabin walls. I'm waiting for the day when they finally chew through the white-painted inner planks of our bedroom, at which point serious measures will need to be taken.

Mice too can be heard running inside the walls. In the spring, we sweep their winter seed caches into the trash, but still they hang around, so that in the morning there is sometimes a small soft body for me to step on, courtesy of our two cats. Bats also enter regularly, squeezing their way through a knothole high on the western wall of the living room. Since

they seem to leave with equal ease, and since there are probably other holes in the walls we don't know about, we've never bothered to plug this one up. Once an overnight guest of ours, lying on the futon couch anticipating peaceful dreams, saw a bat coming through the knothole. He spent the rest of the night with the bedclothes over his head.

Two springs ago we arrived for the season to learn that a mother gray fox was rearing her kits under the living room floor, in the rude crawl space created by an extremely abbreviated rock-wall foundation. The fox moved her family out shortly after we moved in, but as with the bats, we still haven't blocked the gap in the foundation that allows entrance. My girlfriend would say it's because we hope for the foxes to return — but most likely skunks will move in first.

Orraccoons. We think it was a raccoon that burst through the screen door of the kitchen last summer and, as we slept, ate most of our dry goods, including the treats my girlfriend had just brought up from Trader Joe's in Manhattan. Most distressing was the loss of the fruit leather she'd bought for hypothetical camping trips. Dreams die hard, especially when chewed by a raccoon.

But the animals are nothing compared to the bugs, which obviously enter and leave with no conscience or fear whatsoever. The scariest are the wolf spiders we find several times a summer, mostly in the bathroom. My bathrobe is a dark weave of brown and black fuzz that would make splendid cover for a wolf spider; so each morning, after removing it from its hook, I check it carefully before putting it on, somewhat like a cowboy examining his boots for tarantulas. Usually, though, our wolf spiders have been content to be found sitting motionless in the empty bathtub, or else clamped to a wall; waiting, in either case, for ejection via a cupped water glass and a stiff magazine under their feet.

Their grip on ceilings seems less secure, however, judging by the time my girlfriend was taking a bath and a wolf spider dropped from on high into the water beside her. She reacted quickly; so quickly that today she insists she can barely remember what she did once she jumped out, e.g. was it a cup or a glass she used to rescue the dog-paddling spider? A clear case of repressed memory.

By contrast, our neighbor two cabins down remembers far more than she would like of

the night she found a wolf spider in her bed. Her reaction was to have the entire cabin fumigated, then make an appointment with her therapist to discuss her spider "phobia." Can it really be a phobia, though, when it applies to the largest non-vertebrate predator most of us will ever see outside of an octopus? The biggest wolf spiders are the females; from their heads to the tip of their abdomens, they can easily be more than an inch long. One of our evictees looked more like three inches to me — but maybe that was the legs.

Around June we also start getting the much-smaller American house spider. In shape, these have the predatory spiky legs and bulbous abdomen of a black widow, but in color they're a mottled brown; nothing to be alarmed at, but still sinister. They multiply as the summer goes on, feasting on the moths that bump like drunks against the walls in all the rooms, but most of all in the living room and kitchen, where we stay up late summer evenings with lights on.

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The wood frames for the screens, ill-made to start with, are by now warped with years of weather, and the screens themselves are evolving into fewer and larger holes; the moths pour in any time a lamp shines next to a window.

In past years we were careful to use only a yellow lamp on the screened porch, but we've given up on that. White or yellow, the light draws so many moths that after late-night parties the floor of the porch is littered as with ash. The house spiders ignore the fallen dead and follow the living into the cabin, where they make not large, ornate webs that can be admired, but small sticky webs designed only to catch prey and dirty up the walls.

Quite often, spiders of some other, so far indeterminate, species show up in the bathtub or in sink basins. A book on spiders tells me that the individuals who do this aren't thirsty, but wandering males in search of females. In the name of spider conservation, the book suggests gently retrieving them and moving them outdoors. If the creature is large enough, I do this. But if it's small, it gets gathered up in a hank of toilet paper for a trip down the toilet.

Daddy longlegs are another frequent bath-

room visitor, often stump-legged from some previous encounter; unless they're in a human-only zone, such as near the toilet seat, I usually ignore them out of respect for the endearing silliness of their name.

Of course, not everyone is so tolerant when the wild sticks its nose in. Our cabin is part of a present-day art colony, not weavers or potters but writers and painters. Last summer, at the main site down the road, a German painter was assigned a detached bedroom, located in an annex almost as run-down and porous as our cabin. Others in their time have cherished this bedroom for its autonomy, but this painter found it an insult to be so exposed to nonhuman visitors. Insects featured in her criticism, but most of all, the insect-eating bats swooping about outside at dusk.

Germans have a reputation in this country as tidy to the point of rigidity, but I prefer to believe hers was merely the reaction of an especially timid city-dweller, hearing for the first time coyotes instead of car alarms in the night

and ashamed by her fear into complaint.

My own response is simply to be grateful. After seven seasons at Quartette, I've come to see the coyotes, bats, and spiders less as trespassers, and more as ambassadors, connecting us to a larger world.

Each summer goes by faster than the last. As I write this, it's just a week past the notch of midsummer, and the days ripen as they dwindle — the paradox of all life, including the Indian summer of my own middle age.

This week I noticed the strange porcelain blue of a luna moth, heard news of a bear print in the mud, was present when my girlfriend rescued a red eft (the juvenile stage of a newt) from the dirt road leading up to the cabin. It was the first, and so far, only, eft of the season. Once they were as numerous as frogs; why have they nearly disappeared? Last summer a storm ripped gullies through the hardest dirt roads; was it a fluke, or will it happen again? The cabin exposes rather than protects us, and broader questions stir.

But let the answers wait; for unlike the vengeful spirits of Cortázar's story, the invaders here seem willing to share a while longer. ♦