

## STORIES OF WILD RABBITS & WOODPECKERS

By John F. Hall

Several months ago, my son, John was concerned that something had dug a fresh hole near the door leading into the new storage building. I first thought that it might be a



ground hog. Then, one day, my son noticed “Bunny Hop,” the name that I gave to the mother rabbit, coming out of the new hole with her litter of four baby rabbits. This story begins when I heard a drumming sound, like that made from a distant jackhammer. It was a fast rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, or twenty or more, fast hammer knocks. It was followed by a pause, then another twenty, or more, fast hammer knocks. A woodpecker can peck 20 times a second, or 8,000 to 12,000 pecks a day. It had been nearly a decade since I can recall hearing that sound. My wife, Paula said: “That is a woodpecker!”

Kentucky is home to seven common species of woodpeckers - The smallest is the downy woodpecker. It measures about six inches from the top of its head to the bottom of its tail. The largest is the pileated woodpecker. It measures about 17.5 inches. There is one woodpecker called the yellow-bellied sapsucker. It only appears during the non-breeding season of August through March. About a decade ago, I had to repair a 2-inch wide hole that a woodpecker made on the eve on the west side of my house. I covered that hole with a 6-inch by 6-inch, quarter inch piece of scrap wood, that I painted white. My house has a metal roof and aluminum siding. A woodpecker can drill a hole through the aluminum siding. They can puncture gutters and downspouts. Woodpeckers begin their heavy drumming and drilling activities during the fall season - September 22nd to December 21st. That is what surprised me. I had not been expecting any woodpeckers in May, and it had been nearly a decade since a heard their hammering sound.

I wondered if woodpeckers get headaches? It can slam its beak into a tree with 1,200g’s of force. This surpasses the less that 100g’s that can cause concussions in humans. A recent study revealed that the woodpecker’s beak and head essentially act like a stiff hammer, striking and stopping in unison. Woodpeckers use their beaks to excavate holes for raising their young, to forage for insects ensconced in dead limbs, and to drum to establish their territory. The average life of a woodpecker is 4-11 years. Elizabeth Madox Roberts wrote a poem called, “The Woodpecker.” These are her words: “The woodpecker pecked out a little round hole, and made him a house in a telephone pole. One day when I watched, he poked out his head, and he had on a hood and collar of red. When the streams of rain fall out of the sky, and the sparkles of lightning go flashing by, the big wheels of thunder roll, he can snuggle back into the telephone pole.”

Harold Adamson, Eldo Di Lazaro, and Bruno Cherubini wrote the song, “The Woodpecker Song.” These are some of their lyrics: “He’s up each morning, bright and early, to wake up all the neighborhood. To bring ev’ry boy and girlie, his happy serenade on wood. Hear him pickin’ out a melody, peck, peck, peckin’ at the same old tree. He’s

happy as a bumblebee, all day long. Come on and try that rhythm, just let your heart beat with them... To serenade your lady...happy little woodpecker song...”.

Paula and I listened to the sounds made by woodpecker for two days. It was trying to make a hole in the telephone pole at the entrance to our driveway. The weather man put out a warning of severe thunderstorms and a tornado watch. The storms hit with a vengeance. The straight line winds were over 45 mile an hour. Trigg County received over five inches of rain. I can only speculate that the woodpecker was caught off guard, and had no shelter from the storms. It might have been killed by the high winds. I believe that it was a downy woodpecker, the smallest specie of woodpecker. A few other facts about that woodpecker. It has excellent hearing. It can hear the sounds of insects crawling and chewing inside a tree. It uses its tail feathers as a brace. The feathers form a tripod with the feet to stabilize it as it hops up the tree and chisels into the bark. It will also nest in tree cavities. In a way, I miss hearing the sound of that wood pecker's pecking.

Wild rabbits have been a part of my life, since I moved to Dyers Hill in 1978, with my wife, Paula, and my son, John. We moved into Paula's grandmother's house during a snow storm. It was the only day that I could get away from a coal strike detail in Hopkins County, Kentucky. Paula's grandmother, Iva Oakley, died in 1977. Her house was vacant for one year. Moisture, in only a few years, takes its toll on a vacant house. The day we moved in, I did not see any rabbit tracks in the freshly fallen snow. During the cold winter months, when grasses and greens become inaccessible, the wild rabbit will eat what ever it can find. It can live on sticks, pine needles, tree bark, and other vegetation. Recently, Paula called me into our kitchen. She was using her smartphone to take a picture looking out of our kitchen glass door. The wild rabbit, that I named, "Bunny Hop," was laying on its stomach, on the second brick step that leads to our kitchen door. She said to me: "If you had left the door open, Bunny Hop might have come up to the third step, and hopped right into our kitchen." Everyday, I see wild rabbits when I open my kitchen door in the morning, and when I come home in the evening.

In some ancient culture, rabbits were symbols of fertility and prosperity. In Greek times rabbits were sacred to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. Later on, in folklore, rabbits were portrayed as tricksters who could bring luck and good fortune, if treated with respect. I tend to look at the wild rabbits, on my one acre lot, as my no maintenance pets. I don't have to feed them or take them to the vet. When I come out my kitchen door, they stop eating my clover grass, and they just look at me. As soon as I go back inside, they continue to eat the grass.

There are some facts about wild rabbits that I did not know. Their vision covers nearly 360 degrees, so one can forget about trying to sneak up on them. Their teeth never stop growing. Their rabbit hole leads into elaborate tunnels called "warrens." The female rabbit is called a doe. The baby rabbit is called a kitten (kit). The male rabbit is called a buck. Wild rabbits groom themselves like cats do. They are nocturnal animals, they sleep most of the time during the day. The rabbit sleeps with its eyes open, and it has three eye lids. It is an obligate nose breather, which means that it only breaths through its nose. The domesticated rabbit is the most abandoned pet in North America.

One very nice thing about living on a hill, in the middle of a farm, is that it keeps me in tune with nature. I can see so much of God's splendor, in the flowers of the three dogwood trees in my front yard. The flowers represent the rebirth and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I see His bread from heaven, in the form of the green wheat fields in the front and sides of my house. Thankfully, the strong winds, and the torrential downing of rain, did not damage the wheat crop. I enjoy looking at the tall, majestic cedar trees along Dyers Hill Road. I saved those trees, nearly 60 years ago, when I used them to help hold up the old fence posts that had rotted at their base. This was back in the days when I mowed the pasture fields, tended to the cattle, and repaired the barbwire fences.

So much, it seems, that I have taken for granted. The average life span of a wild rabbit is nine years. But those wild rabbits, not having some of the protections found by living on this hill, may have a life span of just one year. They are easy prey to the coyotes that live in the forest south of Dyers Hill, and to sudden death from the hawks flying overhead. Precious and few are their days their carefree days of lying on their stomachs, and munching on the rich clover grass.

I selected a poem, that highlights our destiny. An unknown author wrote the poem called, "Poem of Life." These are that person's words: "Life is but a stopping place, a pause in what's to be, a resting place along the road to eternity. We all have different journeys, different paths along the way. We all were meant to learn things, but never meant to stay. Our destination is a place, far greater than we know. For some the journey's quicker, for some, the journey's slow. And when the journey finally ends, we'll claim a great reward, and find an everlasting peace, together with the Lord."

God made the woodpeckers and the wild rabbits for us to watch and enjoy. My oldest granddaughter, Andrea, when she was three years old, started calling me "An-Father." You may appreciate that name, as I end this story. I get a smile on my face, when a wild rabbit, that I named "Bunny Hop," lays on her stomach, on one of my kitchen steps, and watches her four baby rabbits, running around and under Paula's car, on our carport. It's almost as if she conveys to them: "Have no fear, An-Father lives here."

\*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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