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River City

On Call

Vermillion Author Chronicles A Reconnection With Nature

By Nathan Johnson

nathan.johnson@yankton.net

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VERMILLION — As a child, Jerry Wilson and some other boys had a close encounter with some coyotes while camping one night.

"They scared the hell out of us," he recalled. "We really thought they were going to eat us."

But as he grew older, the coyote became one of Wilson's favorite animals. In his new book, "Waiting For Coyote's Call: An Eco-Memoir From The Missouri River Bluff," the animal is a representation of his ongoing fascination with the natural world.

"Coyotes are so elusive. They're very hard to see. In all these years, I've only seen them up close a few times," Wilson said. "There's an element of mystery there, and I've never ceased to be intrigued by it. In that sense, the coyote kind of symbolizes the overall quest for understanding and appreciating my place in this biotic community."

Drawn from his daily observations, thoughts and ideas during 25 years of living northwest of Vermillion, the recently published book chronicles the Wilson family's attempts to live life while leaving as small of an environmental footprint as possible. The book contains echoes of literary predecessors such as Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold.

During their lifelong odyssey, 63-year-old Wilson and his wife, Norma, have built a geo-solar home and rehabilitated more than 20 acres of native prairie.

Not only does Wilson use the book to share observations about his relatively small corner of the natural world and his attempts to live a sustainable lifestyle, he also relates the inner journey that has accompanied his better understanding of the environment.

"It is my hope that I, and others whose eyes are open inward as well as outward, will come to know more of both worlds, to see that the two are inseparable, to realize that each dawn brings new opportunities to seek comprehension of nature's mysteries, to pursue biotic balance, to retell the story of sustainability in personal ways, and, in so telling, bring the dream of harmony to fruition," he writes in the preface.

While in awe of the beauty and brutality of nature, Wilson laments man's role in carelessly destroying it.

His own small-scale efforts to restore the prairie ecosystem that existed 150 years ago have been fruitful in many ways, Wilson said.

"As the wildlife habitat improved, the birds and animals returned," he said. "In the early days, it was rare to see a deer or any other wild animal. We had our standard birds at the bird feeder, but there was nothing I didn't recognize. As the habitat improved over the years, we began to get much more diversity in all kinds of life — plants, birds and mammals.

"I think that's what spurred me to begin working on this book: the recognition that as I was evolving in the natural world, the world around me was really evolving, too," Wilson added.



Wilson, a retired English professor and freelance journalist, works in his garden in rural Vermillion. After growing up in Oklahoma, he has spent much of his adult life learning about South Dakota's natural world. Jerry Wilson's new book, "Waiting For Coyote's Call: An Eco-Memoir From The Missouri River Bluff," was released in August. Drawn from his daily observations, thoughts and ideas during 25 years of living northwest of Vermillion, the recently published book chronicles the Wilson family's attempts to live life while leaving as small of an environmental footprint as possible. (Courtesy photo)

Just this week, he played a game with a heard but unseen coyote near his home. Making a wounded rabbit sound, Wilson was able to interact with the wild animal — an experience the retired English professor and freelance journalist found invigorating.

Wilson said it is important for people to recognize, in the words of Leopold, that “the earth is not a commodity to be exploited but a community to which we belong.”

“So many species have been lost,” Wilson said. “Regardless of what I might do here on our property, I can’t possibly restore the native prairie that was here 150 years ago. Many animal, bird and most plant species are lost. They might exist someplace, but they don’t exist locally. Whatever efforts we make to replicate the nature that was here will fall short. But it’s too late to not intervene and not do what we can. To do (otherwise) is to acquiesce to the loss, I think.”

Those efforts can manifest themselves as planting a vegetable garden, recycling, constructing environmentally friendly buildings or consuming fewer goods, Wilson explained.

“I wouldn’t expect or necessarily want anybody to try to duplicate my lifestyle, but I would hope (this book) would prompt people to think about their own lifestyles and what they would want them to be and think about ways they can live more in harmony with nature,” he said. “The more we learn from our interactions with the natural world, not only are we happier, but there is a peace that comes with understanding our place in the world.”

Wilson said he was shocked in the 1990s while working on his book, “American Artery: A Pan American Journey,” a chronicle of his journey from Winnipeg Manitoba, to Canita, Panama. The word “sustainability” was not recognized by Microsoft Word, nor was it in the dictionary, he said. That has since changed.

“In some way, that symbolizes progress we might have made in our awareness as a people in recent years,” Wilson said. “Many of the things we’re doing are not sustainable, and all the crises we face, such as global warming and a shortage of fossil fuels, illustrate that.”

“Waiting For Coyote’s Call: An Eco-Memoir From The Missouri River Bluff” is available from the South Dakota Historical Society Press. Wilson will be at the Yankton Community Library Nov. 13 for two reading and signing sessions. The first will be 4-5 p.m., and the second will be 7-8 p.m.

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