

# VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA  
LEONARD

VILLAGE ADVERTISER August 18, 1983

Have you heard rumors about a talking elephant? In recent weeks I've read several references indicating that someone, somewhere, has raised an elephant that talks. I don't know where this remarkable animal is cloistered, nor whether he speaks English or Swahili, or even whether the rumor will turn out to be a hoax, but the idea is appealing.

Do you suppose people will ever learn to communicate directly and intelligently with other members of the animal kingdom? It's a question I've been asking almost all my life: why, if we're so all-fired smart, can't we learn to interpret the meaning of sounds, cries, and songs of furred, finned, and feathered creatures? It's obvious they can communicate with others of their own species, and often it seems they communicate across species. And those "dumb" animals we domesticate are clever enough to learn at least some of our languages. Why don't we learn some of theirs?

Having shared life with several cats, I know those four footed beasties understand much more of my tongue than I do of theirs. To communicate with me, they must demonstrate clearly their needs: lead me to a door to be let out, their dishes to be fed, a water faucet for a drink. Although each had a different voice and a good vocabulary, I was unable to interpret most of what they tried to tell me.

Yet, all learned to understand many of my words, such as "okay," for permission, "no," for disapproval, to get down when I asked them to, and to come when called.

Dogs learn many commands: Sit. Lie down. Come. Fetch. Quiet. Heel. Stay. Drop it. Give it to me (or someone else). They learn the names of those they live with. And they respond to such words as cookie and ride; yet, for the most part, we fail to interpret their noises with any degree of accuracy.

As for the world of wild creatures, we are almost totally deaf to meanings of their voices. A red squirrel crouched on top of the brush pile last week, chattering and flicking its tail excitedly, for several minutes. I watched, listened and

wondered. Was it scolding? warning? Attempting to attract a mate? Objecting to my presence? I have no idea.

A hoptoad appeared in my garage recently, attracted, no doubt, by insect populations in the woodpile. Concerned that I would run over it when I backed out my car, I used a long pole to persuade it to take shelter under the wood or to go outside. The toad seemed singularly determined to remain just where it sat, unwilling to move to safety. Equally determined, I prodded it, gently. The toad squawked, emitting a sound that might have meant fear or, perhaps, "Quit that!" I'll never know.

Every spring, early morning stillness is shattered by bird calls. Each species of bird has its own distinctive vocabulary, mostly involving several different "songs." Who among us hasn't heard the "tweedle" of the blue jay (which I interpret to be a love call)? And all of us are familiar with the jays' raucous cries when they spot a cat wandering in the bushes. But what do their other calls mean?

When chickadees discover people can be a source of sunflower seeds, the tiny birds can be induced to alight on our outstretched hands. And if no food appears when they are accustomed to find it, they "chickadee" insistently, asking for a handout. They make identical demands when they find, during a summer heat wave, a dry birdbath. Should I neglect to refill the bowl, songs of chickadees remind me.

What messages robins send is beyond my comprehension, but they have many voices; each must have meaning if we could but know it. Two robins in one birdbath communicate with one another, each desiring exclusive use of the bowl even though there's ample space to accommodate both at once.

The same bath will be shared by three, four, sometimes five blackbirds who are more gregarious by nature. Blackbirds, several at a time, come to the birdbath and perform their ritual-of-water. Lifting their heads to the sky, beaks all pointed straight up, they make small unintelligible sounds. Their murmurings may mean, "After you, my dear Alphonse," for all I know. Or perhaps blackbirds give thanks for water.

Crows, for whom I leave tidbits of scrap meat, bones, and waste fat on top of a tree stump I purposely had cut tall enough for a feeding station, keep a sharp watch on that platform. Within minutes from the time I place a small deposit on the stumptop, I hear their hoarse calls which I assume are announcements that "Dinner is served."

On silent wings the crow flock converges. One by one they descend, taking turns; each chooses a portion and leaves some for his fellows. As each flies off with a beakful, his compatriots watch out for danger and wait their own opportunities to partake of the feast.

Birdwatching fascinates many humans. The appearance last April in Folger's marsh off Polpis Road on Nantucket of a lone western reef heron, a native of the western coast of Africa, has attracted birders from as far away as California and Colorado. Ornithologists believe the bird must have been caught in winds of a hurricane that swept the west African coast shortly before the heron appeared on Nantucket. How it survived the journey across the Atlantic Ocean and found sanctuary in Folger's marsh, we cannot imagine. As far as we know, it is the first western reef heron ever seen in North America. Could we but understand heron talk, we might learn much.

While chickadees are among our most companionable native birds, others are surprisingly unthreatened by and apparently curious about people. Catbirds often build nests within a foot or two of houses, and sometimes choose a spot where, although well hidden from sight outdoors, their nest is in plain view through a windowpane. Human faces behind the glass disturb egg-sitters not in the slightest. Catbirds will frequently perch close above our heads as we sit under trees outside; their sparking black eyes, tilting heads, and soft mewings seem to say, "people are funny!"

Another small feathered creature we find friendly is the crested titmouse. Although not as common as chickadees, titmice flutter among blueberry bushes, feed in evergreen foundation plants and, at our house, are objects of affection along with purple, gold, and house finches, chickadees, and whatever others fly in for treats, sips of water, or refreshing baths.

Sea, as well as land animals, "talk" at humans; they learn to understand us. Dolphins are easily trained to obey commands, perform tricks, retrieve objects dropped into deep water and return them to people, and play games such as "catch." Whales "sing"; their songs have been recorded and studied; we know only that whales understand their own music and that we do not. People thrill, on whale-watching cruises, when the enormous mammals surface near the boats as though in response to the presence of humans.

Will we ever learn the languages of animals? Will the talking elephant be the first beast with whom we can communicate? Or are we to be forever separated from all other animals on earth by a gulf of ignorance that still persists after millions of years of co-existence?