

© 1995, 2023 by Robert Eaton
All rights reserved

Dog Canyon

I leave Lincoln on a clear, cool October morning, driving east along the Rio Hondo through tawny, sere foothills, the featureless plains of southeastern New Mexico opening ahead. At Roswell I turn south on US Route 285 and begin tracking the Pecos River through an abused, barren landscape. Here the ground is dry and cracked, dust devils swirl across the highway, and cattle chew listlessly at bunchgrasses under the barbed-wire fences. Solitary, sun-bleached mobile homes impart a forlorn aspect to the scene, and for long stretches the highway runs straight and flat, making a beeline for nowhere. (“Hardscrabble,” Emmett said to me once, describing this area. “Like Oklahoma in the Dust-Bowl days.”) I pass the turnoff to Hagerman, the town proud of its reputation as the pit bull capital of New Mexico, and pass through Artesia, its small refinery closed on this bright Sunday morning. Finally, twelve miles north of Carlsbad, across from the desolate shoreline of Brantley Reservoir, I turn west on New Mexico Route 137 and a sign announces, “Guadalupe Mountains National Park / Dog Canyon Ranger Station / 53 miles.”

Along this rolling, two-laned macadam road the landscape appears less disturbed, less traumatized. Mesquite and creosote crowd the pavement, large-padded prickly pear cacti sprout on small ledges, and in Rocky Arroyo distinctly bedded white limestone cliffs rise above neat modern ranch houses, their lawns irrigated from a flowing stream. The road follows the stream through its cut in the mesa, then veers to the south, crossing an uninhabited expanse of Chihuahuan desert before climbing into the thick piñon-juniper growth of Lincoln National Forest. With each mile from the turnoff its condition

deteriorates. I pass through the hamlet of Queen (where some optimistic local real-estate mogul is attempting to sell vacation lots) and, finally, crawl down unpaved, rocky switchbacks into Dog Canyon. Along the eastern side of the canyon immense limestone cliffs run south into Texas. Through El Paso Gap, up the canyon, past the Hughes and Magby ranches, I head to the state line and park boundary.

I cross into the park, where the native grasses are again growing waist high, and nod to Emmett, sitting in his truck in front of the tiny ranger station, guarding his home like an eagle its aerie. Some things never change, thank goodness. I pull into the parking area across from the campground. Just as I'm climbing out of the car, Emmett drives up and stops, and I walk around to his side of the truck. Although I haven't seen him in eleven years, he appears the same old Emmett: his cheeks flushed and ruddy, his Park Service parka zipped tight around his neck, his Stetson on his head. (From the neck up he has always reminded me of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*.) He doesn't give any indication he remembers me.

"Plannin' to camp?" he asks with a slight homespun drawl, his voice leisurely and apparently unconcerned (though I know better).

Yes, I say, for a couple of nights.

"I noticed your car is sorta loaded down. I thought you might be campin'. You can pitch your tent anywhere up from the bathrooms. Gonna be doing some hikin'?"

I say maybe, and he proceeds to orient me to the trails and inform me of regulations and potential dangers, the latter primarily being rattlesnakes. All this time he is looking me over, assessing whether I'm what he used to call, in a different era, a "flea-bitten hippie" or, on the other hand, a responsible visitor. By the time he leaves, I can sense he is still undecided.

* * *

After pitching my tent, I walk up the arroyo under cover of red-leafed maples, sepia-toned oaks, olive-branched junipers, and smooth, red-barked madrones. Leaves crunch underfoot, and softball-sized spalls of whitish limestone, their corners rounded during their tumble from the high country, form a mosaic on the streambed. Although the sun is still shining brightly, it is low in the sky, the wind has come up, and the temperature is beginning to drop.

The escarpments and ridges forming the Guadalupe emerge from the low-lying desert in southeastern New Mexico and rise and converge to an apex, a prow, a few miles south of the Texas state line. Although the Guadalupe are not especially high mountains by western standards—Guadalupe Peak, the highest point in the range and in Texas, is 8,751 feet—south of the state line they loom nearly a vertical mile above the surrounding

playas and salt flats.

The Guadalupe are composed of fossil-rich limestone and are a remnant of an ancient barrier reef that once encircled a large part of West Texas. In the evocative words of Wallace Pratt, a prominent geologist and oilman who donated the first tract of land for the park, the Guadalupe “in their entirety are no more than a profoundly uplifted segment of Capitan barrier reef—a wall or ridge of rock built by lowly marine organisms in warm, shallow, clear waters on the floor of a long-vanished sea.”

Guadalupe Mountains National Park was opened to the public in 1972. By the time I worked here in 1979, Emmett was already the park veteran, having moved down from Carlsbad Caverns in 1964, shortly after Mr. Pratt donated his land to the federal government. During the park’s early years he was the chief ranger in the more heavily visited Pine Springs District, along the highway on the southeastern side of the mountains. But he didn’t like dealing with the increasing numbers of tourists stopping at the new park, and shortly after my time here he transferred to Dog Canyon, which is far enough off the beaten track to discourage casual visitors.

Emmett is not the kind of chipper, friendly ranger the Park Service likes to have greeting visitors to our national treasures. He has always been prone to pigeonhole people on the basis of their appearance and to treat them accordingly (e.g., flea-bitten hippies), and he is one of the more profane people I have known.

Thinking back, I recall one moment in particular that captures both of those propensities. During the time I worked here, Emmett hired a new seasonal employee sight-unseen, based only on an application that showed the man to be a native West Texan, a graduate of Texas Tech, and skilled with horses and other pack animals. When Blake reported for work, however, he was not the slim-hipped, soft-spoken, crew-cut cowboy Emmett obviously had envisioned; rather, he was gregarious, talkative, and flamboyant-looking, sporting long, uncombed flame-red hair and a silver earring in his left lobe. After Emmett met Blake for the first time, my boss asked him what he thought of his new employee. Emmett mulled the question for a minute, then offered his appraisal:

“Blake seems like a pretty nice fella,” he allowed, “but what the fuck with that earring?”

I also recall a day when Emmett walked into the crowded visitor center fiddling with a retractable tape measure he had used to measure skid marks at the scene of an accident on the highway. The tape wouldn’t wind back into its case.

“Goddam fuckin’ tinker toy,” he said to me in his normal speaking voice, oblivious to the other people standing nearby. “The government buys this cheap shit and it breaks the first time you use it, and then the government replaces it with more cheap shit.” He shook his head and chuckled. “No wonder we’re all goin’ broke.”

I never found Emmett’s profanity offensive, partly because it seemed a natural,

unstressed part of his speech, his patois, his adopted West Texas tongue; and partly because it was, on his part, so far as I could tell, completely unconscious. He did not intend to shock or offend. By the same token, he lacked the awareness to censor his own speech. He talked in the same manner to everyone. The secretaries in the town office blanched and scurried for cover when he walked through the door, and I suspect the Park Service muckamucks were relieved when he requested his transfer to Dog Canyon.

* * *

As I return to the campground, Emmett drives up again and stops—I'm the only camper here, and the upper end of Dog Canyon is not large—and we begin to chat. I tell him I worked in the park a long time ago, and he cocks his head and studies me out of the sides of his eyes from behind his thick glasses. I still don't see any sign of recognition, but he smiles and chuckles, and we talk for a few minutes about former coworkers, now all long-gone from Guadalupe. After we exhaust that topic, I ask him how the larger predators in the park—the black bears and mountain lions—are faring.

“Oh, I suppose they're holdin' their own,” he says after considering the question for a minute. “They just have a hard time survivin' in such a small area. And if they roam outside the park . . . well, you know, the ranch element just blows 'em away.

“Black bears are protected animals in Texas now, but mountain lions aren't—it's just another varmint they can shoot anytime they want. Lions are protected in New Mexico, but, gee, they have huntin' season for 'em, and they get permits to trap 'em too. Wildlife just has a hard time today.

“These guys come around in their beautiful four-wheel-drives, with fancy binoculars and scopes on their rifles. What's the animal got? Four legs and maybe a good nose. So they're at a disadvantage. I'm sorry, but I just can't make those guys out to be big, macho, brave men. I tell some of 'em around here that the only effort they put into it is squeezing the goddam trigger—about a quarter-pound of pressure.

“I'm sure they don't toast to my health.” He laughs, perhaps a bit too heartily, then suddenly grows quiet and pensive.

“When you're in country like this . . . Well, your outlook on wildlife is just different when you've been protectin' 'em your whole career.” His voice is tinged with resignation, or sadness.

I am reminded of a famous Aldo Leopold essay titled “Thinking Like a Mountain.” In that essay Leopold describes how, as a young man in the White Mountains of Arizona, callow and “full of trigger-itch,” he shot and wounded an old wolf. He reached the animal “in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes”—a moment that affected Leopold deeply. Out of that moment he came to recognize the role of predators in the natural

regulation of animal populations and the importance of them to the wild spirit of the world. Few hunters, however, attain such insights.

I ask Emmett about the ranchers immediately to the north of the boundary—the Hughes and Magby clans—who vehemently opposed the establishment of the park and, during the 1970s, refused to grant a right-of-way for the Dog Canyon access road. They continue to complain bitterly about depredations on their livestock by mountain lions who, they say, retreat into the sanctuary of the park after making the kills. In recent years they have lobbied their congressman for permission to track the lions into the park to eliminate them once and for all. The dispute is long-standing. When I worked here, the Dog Canyon ranger found a lion carcass draped across the park’s boundary fence—a taunt from the neighbors to the north.

“They’d do anything for a goddam cow,” Emmett says matter-of-factly. “You’d think it was the goddam Golden Calf.”

He pauses for a minute, pondering. “I don’t understand those people,” he says then. “Their solution to every problem is to kill something. Blow it away. They think it’s their birthright.

“Oh, they talk about how much they hate the federal government and all its regulations, but these days they make their living off the goddam BLM and government subsidies. Eliminate the federal government, and they’d starve.”

I ask him how he gets along with them, his closest neighbors in this isolated country.

He shrugs. “I’ve always just made it a point to tend to my side of the fence and mind my own business.”

He is quiet for a long while. “This canyon was named for the prairie dogs,” he says finally, staring off through the windshield of his truck. “Used to be huge towns of ’em out there in the grasses. That was probably somethin’ to see. I imagine you had your birds of prey swoopin’ down to pick ’em up. But they killed all of them too. Killed everything for their goddam cattle.”

* * *

At dusk, after my camp dinner, I stroll around the loop at road’s end here in Dog Canyon. More deer than I have ever seen in the wild—fifty or sixty muleys—are browsing in the meadow around the road. As I walk closer, all of them stop, prick up their ears, and stare at me suspiciously. When I get too close, they begin to edge away slowly, still chewing but ready to bound if I make a false move.

I recall some favorite lines from Stephen Vincent Benét:

When Daniel Boone goes by, at night,
The phantom deer arise
And all lost, wild America
Is burning in their eyes.

I inspect the small, tidy barn and the official Park Service horse trailers at the end of the circle. Emmett loves horses, and when he patrols the high country, he still does so, as he always has, on horseback. (In the early days he bought saddles and tack with his own money and donated them to the park.) Out back of the barn, in the corral, three well-fed, recently brushed horses—a sorrel, a palomino, and a gray—are munching on hay in their feed bins. As I watch, a doe walks up daintily beside the palomino and tries to sneak some hay. The palomino noses her away, whinnying softly.

As I walk back to my campsite, the first owl of the evening hoots in the talus below the cliffs. The wind has calmed, and the night—a cold, breathless autumn night, the sky as black as obsidian—descends on the Dog.

* * *

In the morning the sun comes late to the campground in the canyon, finally peeking over the limestone cliffs long after dawn on the eastern side of the mountains. After a leisurely breakfast I load my daypack, register at the trailhead, and begin walking up the Tejas Trail. I walk by Lost Peak and into the high country, climbing through piñon, juniper, and scrub oak into ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, and limber pine. Despite the thick forest the wind on the ridges is gusty and swirling, reminding me, in case I had forgotten, that the winds here can be a relentless irritant and menace. In the Guadalupe one appreciates the fact that the wind, like little else in this world, can drive people mad.

The worst winds gather on the immense salt flats west of the park, converge at the southern tip of the mountains, and funnel ferociously through Guadalupe Pass. Dog Canyon, set between the Brokeoff Mountains to the west and the main body of the Guadalupe to the east and south, is relatively protected and calm. On the eastern side of the mountains, however, it is not uncommon for the winds to blow steadily for days at a time, forty or fifty miles per hour.

When the winds begin to howl, nothing—not people, not horses, not wildlife—likes to venture out. At the old visitor center, at the top of the pass, the wind shredded the flag every couple of weeks, and the official anemometer literally blew apart in a gust one day. Everyone who spends time in the Guadalupe develops a repertory of stories about the wind. The story of the two truck drivers pulling a double-wide mobile home who stopped one day at the Pine Springs Cafe along the highway on the southeastern side of the

mountains; while they were inside drinking coffee, a gust blew the double-wide, in Emmett's words, "to smithereens." The story of the pilot who claimed her single-engine plane was blown to a standstill one day as she tried to fly through the pass. (Not surprisingly, the mountains' southeastern escarpment is littered with the wreckage of other planes.)

For more than sixty-five years Walter and Bertha Glover ran the Pine Springs Cafe. When tourists asked Mrs. Glover if the wind always blew like this, she often responded with her favorite line.

"Oh no," she liked to say as she turned away slyly. "Sometimes it blows from the other direction."

Walking along this rocky trail, I also recall that the Guadalupe are the snakiest place I've ever hiked, a fact that causes me some apprehension this warm October day. Other places have snakes, but none I know has the variety and population density of the Guadalupe. Western diamondback, black-tailed, prairie, and rock—four species of rattlesnakes alone. (My reptile field guide provides this rather alarming information about the prairie rattler: "Western counterpart of the Timber Rattlesnake but much more excitable and aggressive. . . . [L]arge numbers may overwinter together at a common den site.") When I worked here and routinely patrolled the trails, I was always arousing furious, buzzing rattlers. I have nothing against our reptilian neighbors—live and let live, I say—but by the time the first snow fell, I was beginning to see sticks writhe and coil.

All in all, the Guadalupe are a tough place to live even today, and they would have been a much tougher place to eke out a living fifty or a hundred or two hundred years ago. Not many people tried: small bands of Comanches and Mescalero Apaches in temporary camps in the canyons, a few white settlers and ranchers around the base of the mountains. In recent years the Park Service employees have joined that lineage, but the isolation drives most of them away after a year or two. Now that Bertha Glover is gone, Emmett may have lived here—by "here" I don't mean the surrounding desert, which in many ways is more hospitable than the high country, but close in to the mountains themselves—longer than anybody.

He has always been something of an enigma to me. Although he mentioned once that he grew up on a farm in Missouri and served in the Marine Corps before starting to work for the Park Service, he rarely talks about his past, and it usually seems as if he had no life before he came to the Guadalupe. He takes his job seriously, giving it priority over everything else he does, and he expects the people who work for him to do the same. "Working for the Park Service is not an eight-to-five job," he likes to say, and he has no patience with coworkers who balk at working overtime (whether paid or not) or who complain about being called after-hours for emergencies.

By modern standards his view of women is not enlightened. Depending on his

mood he tends to see them either in idealized terms, i.e., as members of a fairer, gentler sex, or as impediments to a man's doing his job. I once overheard him chastising a ranger who had been absent from the park during a search-and-rescue operation. "You can't work in this park," he said peevishly, "if you're always gonna be runnin' into town with your wife to buy a sack of potatoes."

In addition to being suspicious of people he meets and judgmental of people he knows, he is full of outrageous (though not necessarily unthoughtful) opinions about the larger issues of the day (e.g., his observation about the problem of illegal immigration from Mexico: "We wouldn't have this problem today if Sam Houston had marched to Mexico City a hundred and fifty years ago and kicked their asses. We'd just have a few more states, and probably everyone would be better off."). But in his curmudgeonly way Emmett can be charming, and he is unfailingly honest and dependable. I like Emmett, much more than I like the glib, overly familiar people who seem to greet me everywhere these days, and I can think of no one I would rather have caretaking a remote, rugged, beautiful place like Dog Canyon.

During my time at the park I didn't work in Emmett's division. Although I often saw him in the visitor center and on the roads and occasionally visited him in the historic Rader ranch house where he lived then, I spent only one full workday with him, a day when I was assigned to accompany him to the western side of the park to help him repair part of the boundary fence that had been reported damaged, a day that remains my most vivid memory of my months in the Guadalupe.

I met him at the visitor center early in the morning. Emmett is fair-complected and, out of a fear of skin cancer, has developed a fanatical aversion to the sun. That day he was wearing his standard out-of-doors work uniform: a stylish beaver-felt Stetson, under which a red bandanna flowed down over his ears and the back of his neck; dark glasses; zinc oxide on the bridge of his nose; another bandanna knotted around his neck, available, if necessary, to protect his chin; a long-sleeved khaki shirt and khaki pants (he rarely wore the standard Park Service gray-and-green); work boots; and leather gloves. By pulling up the knotted bandanna, he could ensure that not a single square inch of his skin was exposed. He looked like a spaceman in a cheesy 1950s sci-fi movie. I knew Emmett, and his outfit struck me as odd or amusing. I wondered what visitors who encountered him thought.

Before we left the Pine Springs area, we stopped at Mrs. Glover's store, where Emmett bought me a can of pop to drink on the way over. Mrs. Glover liked Emmett—together they shared the easy manners of West Texas locals. Mrs. Glover was the one from whom I had learned a surprising bit of information about Emmett's past: that he had been married once; but, in her words, "it didn't take."

After leaving Mrs. Glover's, we drove down the pass, around El Capitan (the prow of the Guadalupe), and west to the turnoff for Williams Ranch. We unlocked the gate and

ground up the dirt road in four-wheel drive, the immense cliffs, talus slopes, and alluvial fans of the mountains' western prospect towering above us. Before we started to work on the fence, Emmett wanted to check on a couple of windmills he had repaired and got pumping again. He was keeping the old stock tanks filled for the wildlife, and as we approached the first one, set in a small grove of cottonwoods near an abandoned ranch house, a golden eagle flew up suddenly from its perch in one of the trees and a coyote loped off into the brush, glancing at us over its shoulder. After we got out of the truck, we heard songbirds in the trees, but otherwise the day was quiet and still. A benign morning in the Guadalupe. Emmett was excited by the wildlife we had seen.

"It's starting to come back," he said, "after having been shot at and blown away all these years."

He got his binoculars from the back of the truck and scanned the desert in the direction of the mountains. He was a man in his element.

After checking the water level in the tanks, we drove farther, parked, and walked up an arroyo toward the damaged fence. There, in the arroyo, we came upon a scatter of owl pellets and, above our heads, high in the wall of the arroyo, the burrow of a great horned owl. We spent twenty or thirty minutes examining and collecting pellets, which Emmett said he was going to take back to the visitor center in case someone wanted to use them in an interpretive exhibit. Each pellet contained dozens of rodent bones—femurs, vertebrae, and fragments of skull—in a matrix of hair and fur, and each told a story of a vigilant watch and silent, swooping wings; a brief, futile struggle; and a small, noiseless death in the night.

We spent four or five hours on the west side, not talking much, just restringing barbed wire, quietly eating our brown-bag lunches, and occasionally pausing to identify a bird or watch the shadows shift on the limestone escarpment. At day's end Emmett didn't thank me for helping him—he didn't believe in thanking people for doing what they were paid to do—but I could tell he was pleased with our work, and when we got back to Pine Springs, he hurried into the visitor center like a little boy to show everyone the treasures we had found.

The story has an addendum and, perhaps, a moral, though it still is not clear to me what that moral properly is. The year after Emmett and I worked on the west side, the Park Service natural-resource specialists heard about his stock tanks and ordered them drained. The tanks were not a part of the natural ecosystem, they said, and therefore did not belong in a national park, where the restoration of the ecosystem is one of the primary goals.

I don't know what Emmett thought about their decision. It is tempting to picture him as the defender of wildlife battling the narrow-minded, technical bureaucrats and to assume that he disagreed with what they did, but Emmett, aware of the larger mission of the Park Service, may have appreciated the rationale behind their decision. He may have

thought to himself, “I suppose we mustn’t alter the environment, even to favor the animals, even to compensate for their decimation during the past century. I suppose they’re right.” He may have thought that. If, indeed, they were right.

Now, eleven years later, he is still here, and everyone else involved in that particular incident is long gone. He outlasted all of them. And as I descend from Manzanita Ridge into Dog Canyon this warm, breezy October afternoon, I find myself wondering if, after all, he can help himself; wondering if, hidden in these dry foothills, there are other products of his initiative: seeps dug out under limestone ledges, check dams pooling rocky arroyos, wooden troughs filled with spring water.

* * *

In the middle of the night I awake to the sound of an animal snuffling near the tent. I fumble for my flashlight, sit up, and shine it out the front door. A ringtail cat, tail as long as its slender body, is nosing around the picnic table at my campsite. Its movements appear routine, its behavior tame, but when it looks in my direction, its eyes suddenly burn green and wild in the beam of light.

* * *

I awake early, struggle into clothes, and crawl out of the tent into the dawn chill. Above me, in the brushy talus below the cliffs, I hear, like a bow pulled across a violin, the call of a bull elk. I scan the slopes for ten minutes but am unable to spot the animal.

The indigenous elk were exterminated by the early settlers, but a replacement species was introduced in 1929. Although the herd is not growing in size, it is sustaining itself, and the animals now contribute their awkward, eerie presence to the canyon.

I drink hot tea and fiddle with my breakfast until the sun clears the cliffs, then slowly fold the tent and pack the car. On my way out of the park I stop at Emmett’s house—a neat, new frame house—to say goodbye and thank him for taking care of the place. He comes to the door in his khakis.

“How was your walk yesterday?” he asks.

Pleasant but windy, I respond.

“Did you see any wildlife up there?”

When I say no, he looks disappointed. On the wall behind him a mountain lion stares at me from a picture frame, its ears erect, its eyes penetrating and impassive.

I take my leave and drive slowly out of the park, past the Hughes and Magby ranches, down Dog Canyon, and through El Paso Gap. I waited eleven years to come back to this place, and I may not return for many more—my life is taking me in other directions

these days. But Emmett—once again, as always, he stays. He has devoted his life to the protection of these lonely canyons and mountains, and he knows them better than anybody. What a curious, solitary character he is. Why is he still here? What does this place mean to him? And what did he leave behind?

As I climb the rocky switchbacks out of Dog Canyon, I realize I will never know the answers to those questions. Nor, I suppose, do I need to. It is enough, isn't it, that he has stayed and knows? Enough that he is the dog in the Dog, the keeper of the kingdom, the last lone ranger.

###