

A voice from wilderness defends Oak Bay's deer

Written by Joan Russow

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By Jack Knox: Times Colonist



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Kelly Carson works the bullhorn during an anti-deer cull protest in Oak Bay Village.
Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, Times Colonist

The knock on opponents of Oak Bay's urban-deer cull is that they themselves are urban animals — latté-sucking city dwellers with a Disneyfied view of nature.

Which, for the anti-cull crowd's most familiar face, is as far from reality as the isolated lighthouses in which she grew up.

In fact, being raised amid more animals than people profoundly influenced DeerSafe founder Kelly Carson's outlook.

Born in Vancouver, she was six when she moved to McInnes Island, 40 kilometres west of Bella Bella, with her younger brother, mother and lighthouse keeper stepfather.

"I remember the day we landed," she says. "There was a blizzard. ... We had to jump onto the rocks." They weren't dressed for the weather, so the fellow driving the boat gave each of the kids one of his mittens.

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From the ravens who stole her toys to the mink in the garden, animals were her only companions, but no, it wasn't Disney. She remembers sea lions scrambling onto the rocks to escape the orcas. One fell off. "The water turned red."

Once, while peering into a tidal pool, she gave little thought to a pod of whales in the distance — until one shot over to check her out, suddenly looming up so close that its dorsal fin filled her vision before it silently sank away. "It didn't occur to me until years later that I could have been lunch."

When she was eight, another sea lion pulled onto the rocks, pursued by a commercial fishboat. A fisherman, brandishing a rifle, motioned to her to move out of the way of his shot. She refused. "I just stood there. I wasn't going to leave."

She was still eight when the family moved to Egg Island, 55 kilometres north of Port Hardy. It was her home for 11 years. Another family shared lightkeeping duties, but that was it for human contact. "There were never any kids our age."

The family's one-month annual leave was usually spent in Vancouver, but for a three-year stretch in her mid-teens Carson didn't see civilization at all. Instead, vacations were spent boating around the coast.

It was at Bella Bella that she first saw "casual violence" against animals, kids having "drowning races" to get rid of unwanted kittens and puppies as directed by their parents. With no vet to spay and neuter pets and keep the dog population under control, the Mounties would periodically shoot those deemed to have turned feral.

When Carson finally hit the city, moving to Vancouver at age 19, it was culture shock. She couldn't get used to being in a car, had never owned a television (still doesn't), didn't know what people were talking about much of the time. "I would talk about animals and birds, because that's what I knew, but people's eyes would glaze over, so I stopped talking about that."

Carson was still 19 when she had her first child, the second arriving a couple of years later.

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She persuaded her husband to be a lightkeeper (“I said there would be no Hydro bills and no rent”) and headed for the station at Pachena Point on the west coast of Vancouver Island, soon followed by another at Cape Scott. Lots of mammals this time: bears, wolves, cougars. And deer, of course. When they wiped out her garden at Cape Scott, on the northern tip of the Island, it meant no fresh vegetables for a family whose only other source of food was a supply ship.

In the mid-1980s, when her eldest reached school age, the family moved to Victoria. Carson, who works for the government, has been here ever since.

She was part of the group that relocated more than 600 University of Victoria bunnies to Coombs in 2010. “That experience taught me that we’re not helpless. It taught me that if you organize, you can make a difference.”

When the killing of urban deer came up for debate, she founded DeerSafe, a group that has maybe 10 core members and 80 on the email list. Its members plan to observe, but not interfere, when Oak Bay traps and kills 25 urban deer. DeerSafe has collected more than 4,000 signatures on a petition, though it’s not always a pleasant experience. Even animal-lovers aren’t sold on her cause. “I’ll be standing on a corner and people will come within inches of my face and scream at me.”

She doesn’t enjoy that. Nor does she like speaking to crowds or using the bullhorn, but Carson — a vegan for nine years, vegetarian for 24 — keeps at it because she feels compelled to stand up for her beliefs. “I’m just trying to do no harm.”

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