

## Protestations of a Field Person

Dale F. Lott

"Welcome back! Have a good vacation"?

"I wasn't on vacation. I was in the field."

"I know. That's what I mean."

*Well that's not what I mean. Being in the field isn't a vacation; it's hard work, a hard life, and besides . . .*

But hold your tongue. People who spend months at a time noting the behavior of animals in odd corners of the world are usually greeted that way. We're happy with our work, of course, but for several reasons it doesn't qualify as a vacation.

Sometimes just living there is a problem. If you can't find or afford a convenient house, camping out becomes living in a tent by the second week. And the kind of stick-to-your-ribs food that stores well in a burlap bag or metal box soon starts to stick in your throat. Some colleagues and I went to visit Patti Moehlman's burro study in Death Valley a couple of years ago, and brought along some steak. Patti had been without refrigeration for weeks. Her response was succinct and eloquent: "GOLL-EE, REDMEAT." She ate enraptured, purging for a time the taste and texture of globs of margarine and peanut butter on week-old bread, and vienna sausage taken neat, still cold, and coated with gelatin. So welcome was the steak that it hardly mattered that the water from a desert cloudburst streamed

into our plates as we ate crouching under a picnic table.

But food and housing are far from the worst of it. You can get used to eating almost anything and sleeping almost anywhere. The worst of it is that you get to be a little bit batty.

To be more specific, you get to be sort of manic-depressive. You experience mood swings that increase as a direct function of the number of seven-day weeks you've spent on the project. The research has its ups and downs, of course, but they are nothing compared to the emotional roller coaster the researcher is riding. The most salient symptom is that your evaluation of the study gets to be wildly unrealistic.

High noon may find your pulse racing as your mind forms the kind of modest, contained, but penetrating remarks that persuade the National Academy of Sciences plenary session that the Nobel Committee did indeed know what it was doing when it cited your analysis of the distribution of deer droppings, the grumpiness of goose gatherings, or the ballistics of bison bellowing as the intellectual link that completed the conceptual chain from molecule to mastadon. Your lips move a little as you take on a set of bored, cynical journalists who came to the press conference to play it for laughs and a chance to get in a dig at the granting agency that spent nearly \$1,750 in support of your research. A basic stock of fine ironic wit, a dash of captivating candor, an irresistibly lucid illumination of The Link in laymen's terms and they are first sobered, then

entranced. When you release them from your spell, they will sprint to their typewriters and set their two forefingers to banging out near poetry in praise of basic research and (blush) you.

That evening you may be so sunk in shame that you want to change not only your study but your name. How could you have committed yourself to a study so barren and one for which you are so ill prepared? What will you say to that granting agency when they ask what became of more than \$1,750 intended to support *significant* basic research? If you take the entire blame you'll never get another chance. Besides it wasn't *all* your fault; but how do you make them understand that fate has thwarted you at every turn, that your field glasses fogged up during nearly three goose gatherings, that the microphone salesman was lying, *lying* when he told you how far away it would pick up bison bellows? Yes, who will bear witness that your failure was not really your fault now that God has turned his face from you?

And so you go on, ever more sublimely happy, ever nearer suicide. During your more lucid moments you realize, of course, that you're getting to be a little bit batty, and you come to crave some stabilizing influence to dampen your oscillations. Contact with an old friend becomes so welcome that you hold your tongue even if he says something stupid like, "Welcome back! Have a good vacation?"

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