

Bioregion, Biopolitics, and the Creaturely List: The Trouble with FaunaWatch

Tanis MacDonald

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Article abstract

Canada's tradition of nature poets who are also philosophically astute (or, conversely, philosophical poets who are astute about bioregionality) is long and would include Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, and Jan Zwicky, to name just a few. My own practice of observing and archiving animals, and writing about such archiving practices, an ongoing project called FaunaWatch, has made it clear that nothing about doing so is simple, just as nothing about being the owner-operator of a fleshy body is simple. This essay examines my practice of observation and archiving a bioregional creaturely list as an important critical and creative process, though one that is powered by an acquisitive energy, raising questions about the culture of sighting and "collecting" sights. FaunaWatch, as practice and as project, has increased in complexity precisely because of its humble (and humbling) beginnings, growing as it did out of my intense desire to fix myself in the realities of my geographical location in southwestern Ontario. When a hybrid of scholarly discourse and bioregional presence goes into the woods, it is no real surprise to find the organic impulse of the poem and the biological organism, the animal self and the animal other, undermined by uncertainty.

Bioregion, Biopolitics, and the Creaturely List: The Trouble with FaunaWatch

TANIS MACDONALD

I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary.

— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (76)

Proposition: Into the Woods

I WENT INTO THE WOODS near my house because I thought I could learn. I was deliberate, but the task was not that simple. Absolutely nothing about observing animals, or writing about observing animals, is simple, the way that nothing about being the owner-operator of a fleshy body is simple. I took to heart Thoreau's resistance to practising resignation as important for me as a writer of both creative and critical works. Canada's tradition of nature poets who are also philosophically astute (or, conversely, philosophical poets who are astute about bioregionality) is long and would include Don McKay, Tim Lilburn, Karen Solie, and Jan Zwicky, to name just a few. I am more of a poet/critic, and when such a hybrid of scholarly discourse and bioregional presence goes into the woods, it is no real surprise to find the organic impulse of the poem and the biological organism, the animal self and the animal other, undermined by uncertainty.

Practice: Implicated Watching

When Congress 2011 was held at the university where I teach and research, I hosted two visiting scholars at my home. We were in the living room talking over the day's papers and keynotes when the cat stiffened to attention at the front window, and we looked out to see a raccoon on the lawn. Raccoons are notoriously fastidious about their food, often washing it — and their paws — before eating, but this rac-

coon could not have been less choosy. Ripping up the grass, she bit on one end of an earthworm and yanked it centimetre by centimetre from the sod with her jaws, stretching the worm taut as an elastic band. By the time the worm finally snapped out of the ground and the raccoon crammed the length of it, still wriggling, into her mouth, we shouted in triumph. It was savage; it was ravenous; it was the most fascinating display we had seen all day. We stayed awake for another hour on the pulsing energy of it. Did we exoticize the sight? Most definitely. Did we think of this as a problem? If we did, no one mentioned it.

Since January of 2011, I have posted on my Facebook page and my Twitter feed a series of updates that I call FaunaWatch. The format is intentionally spare: the designation or hashtag “FaunaWatch,” a location, and a list of non-human beings seen that day in my (mostly) urban world. A typical day’s post might read “FaunaWatch Waterloo to Kitchener: five wild turkeys by Highway 8, red-tailed hawk above Conestoga, rabbit in median at Bridgeport.” Farther afield, it might read “FaunaWatch San Francisco: brown pelican in harbour, twenty goats on Russian Hill, flock of green-and-peach parrots near Coit Tower.” But many are much duller: “FaunaWatch backyard: cardinal, downy woodpecker, and juncos at feeder. Neighbourhood chipmunk.” Clearly, what I see and what I post changes with the location and the season, even the time of day, but the idea is always the same: see it, post it, try not to crow. The practice itself recalls the lists kept by dedicated birders, though with two important distinctions. The FaunaWatch posts include mammals, insects, and reptiles, as well as birds, and repetition is important, especially in the local posts. I might see the same rabbit three days in a row, or I might be unable to distinguish between the flock of wild turkeys in one part of the Laurel Creek Conservation Area and what appears to be, but is not necessarily, a different flock in another part of the conservation area on two separate occasions. The rule is if I see it, I list it and post it. That ravenous raccoon on the lawn appeared as a FaunaWatch post for that day.

The practice of listing is addictive, and its acquisitive energy raises questions about the culture of sighting and “collecting” sights. Looking is never a benign or apolitical act, but it is easy to forget that. I have been fooled into thinking of FaunaWatch as a dip into the pool in which the quotidian mixes with the notable. The FaunaWatch posts slip easily into the banal, particularly when contrasted with the urban

culture that is often featured in the status updates of others: mayoral and government scandals, births, deaths, literary events, witticisms, political rants, and hilarious or heartbreaking accounts of odd encounters. I can name dozens of posts that are intrinsically more exciting to read than a FaunaWatch post. Yet, as a practice, the FaunaWatch project has multiplied in complexity precisely because of its humble (and humbling) beginnings, growing as it did out of my intense desire to fix myself in the realities of my new geographical location in southwestern Ontario. I moved to the area because of my appointment to Wilfrid Laurier University; although I had lived in Toronto, I am originally from the prairies and consequently knew nothing about Ontario life outside the Greater Toronto Area. Like many small Canadian cities, Waterloo has material advantages in its clean air, affordable housing, urban green space, and surrounding farmland, and some cultural challenges, including a literary culture that depends on only a few stalwart citizens and a main drag that caters more to student drinking than to plays, or films, or galleries. My sense of displacement grew after I bought a house and began to fear that my commitment to a small plot of land and the building on it would consume me. The mere mention of a broken window or a purchase larger than a vacuum cleaner propelled me into the “and-then-you-die” stratosphere. And then I heard the chirping from the basement.

My first thought was that we had a plague of frogs, but I listened some more and recognized the sound as a cricket singing in the cool damp of the cellar. I thought of Dickens’s *Cricket on the Hearth* and George Selden’s *The Cricket in Times Square*, neither of which I had read in many years. I remembered, however, that both suggested that the cricket was a good-luck charm for a household. That cricket sang for several weeks in the basement; I never found him, but he stuck in my mind. The next spring, I found a muskrat trapped under our chain-link fence, still alive and watching me. She was wedged under the angle of the link, and it was clear that unless she got free, one of the neighbourhood cats could make short work of her. I had a strange experience when I first spotted her. I could not recognize the kind of creature she was, despite having seen many muskrats along the Seine River in Manitoba. These seconds of confusion were both disconcerting and freeing; it was, frankly, a relief to look and not know anything. Derrida calls this the moment of “following,” when the watcher is caught in the gaze that

strips him or her naked, philosophically, and he compares the experience to being caught in the sight of “a seer” or “visionary” (372). The moment could not last, of course. I went inside and told my partner that we had an animal trapped under the fence, and he came out with some wire cutters and clipped the wire that had trapped the muskrat. She slipped free and ran for the nearest egress. As she ran, I took a photo: she appears as a dark, fuzzy shape among a tangle of garden tools in the neighbours’ driveway, unrecognizable once again. But that muskrat made me curious, as the cricket had. We could not figure out how she had made it so far from the river. I pulled up a map and saw that the Laurel Creek bed, however, ran just a block and a half away, no more than a ditch in our neighbourhood, but expanding into a small but determined waterway in other parts of town.

We moved close by the Laurel Creek Conservation Area in 2010, and I joined Facebook shortly after the move. When two wild turkeys landed on our driveway in November of that year, I had to mention it on Facebook as a bizarre neighbourhood occurrence. Then I noted the merlin that we spotted in the backyard and the geese passing so low overhead that I could hear them breathing, and I felt the return of an old practice, born from all the long camping trips of my childhood. I had kept during those trips what I called a camp diary that accounted the day’s animal sightings, filled with illustrations and useful information about how to recognize the animals by appearance, habitat, and characteristics. These descriptions grew more elaborate as other children that I met would call chipmunks squirrels, or frogs toads, or deer moose, and I was infuriated by their casual grasp of what seemed to me to be so specific. It sounds like an Atwoodian beginning, and in some ways it was. My brother and I spent four to six weeks a year as unplugged as it got — no television, limited radio (controlled by my father) on the drive from campsite to campsite, and only a handful of books. This was before the days of hot showers or electrical hook-ups in campsites. The more rustic the site, the more my father valued it as a destination: some were just spots by a lake with road access. We saw a lot of deer and a lot of bears, and because this was long before most wildlife was used to the presence of humans, the animals usually looked us over and headed in the other direction. We were taught that wild animals were different from our pets, and that while they were fascinating, they had a right to both space and respect. We were visitors in their neighbourhood. I want

to stress that the times were not more innocent nor were the camping trips always bucolic, but our contact with animals was frequent.

Perversely, nothing made me feel more like a visitor to a neighbourhood than owning a home, so I wanted to watch and learn from the previous inhabitants, including the animals and birds that lived there. So FaunaWatch grew both by chance and by design. I pulled the title from Alissa York's *Fauna*, a novel about the confluence of animal and human life in the Don Valley, and added the tongue-in-cheek suffix "Watch" to connote urgency (NewsWatch! StormWatch!) and humour. I had been using the title for more than a year when poet and forest mushroomer Ariel Gordon mentioned the Australian group of the same name and wondered what my affiliation was with them. There is none, though our aims to note the presence of creaturely proximity are similar. But while the Australian group is organized, with a website and a membership, FaunaWatch is just me and a loose collection of friends and colleagues who chime in on occasion, posting their own pictures and sightings, sending me recommendations and commenting on my posts. FaunaWatch has also introduced me to avid citizen scientists and amateur naturalists (as my father was): birders, volunteer conservation wardens, backyard chicken keepers, or people who are aware of the necessity, and the ironies, of negotiating space alongside the animals.

Because the plan was to watch carefully so as to see with whom I was sharing a space, I made some discoveries about how the wild and the urban interact in my bioregion. May to June is groundhog season, and not a week passes when I don't see at least one groundhog exhibiting the incredible insouciant quality of a large rodent with all the time in the world. Wild turkeys live and breed in family units of about four adults and seven to nine chicks in the Laurel Creek Conservation Area, with June to September being the prime spotting season. Herons frequent the Columbia reservoir, as well as the reservoir at Laurel Creek, but orioles prefer the forest canopy at Columbia to the one at Laurel Creek. In the winter, small mammals beat a path through the snow beside our fence that we call the "Little Paw Highway": we expected to see rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and raccoons and saw plenty of these footprints. Our elderly neighbour told us to watch for a mammal that liked garbage; he described it as a gray rat but much, much bigger. He could not think of the name of the creature, and I had a few minutes of blankness, parallel to the non-recognition that I had with the muskrat. What was

this animal that could not be named? A quick look at wildlife websites confirmed that possums had come north to Ontario with the milder winters more than a decade ago and were doubtless living in the forest half a block to the west. We eventually saw their paw prints, which looked disconcertingly like the handprints of a human baby, lost in the snow. Connections like this, so adroitly Wordsworthian in their “natural piety,” reminded me that my taxonomical fervour was weirdly elegiac: more than simply a nostalgic longing for an unrealized perfect past and always subject to the knowledge that the sublime present washes intimacy with perversity.

So FaunaWatch is not magic, and I can’t even fool myself that I operate as a good citizen scientist. The cornfields a mere two blocks from my house are apparently full of horned larks, according to the local birding website, and yet I have never seen one. Time, season, location, and happenstance rule the day. Much as I love the principle of poetic attention, or even “ecstatic attention” (97), as Denise Levertov calls it in her classic text *Poet in the World*, it is clear to me that poetic attention does not command the natural world. An unwritten FaunaWatch rule is that there is negative capability involved in being in a certain place at an undetermined time that can provide the strangest of opportunities. Expect the unexpected, and then find a way to name it.

Problems: Watching after *Genesis*

Wildness requires no organizational intervention, even of the purest and most democratic sort. Wildness is whole. It is the antithesis of the domesticated human state, uncontaminated by power, claims to power, or the need for power.

— John A. Livingston, *Rogue Primate* (172)

At the beginning, FaunaWatch needed some guiding parameters for how to look and how to write about what I saw. So I developed some rules that seemed sensible enough to follow and challenging enough to keep my attention. But as soon as I devised them, the rules swiftly revealed themselves to be full of holes, demanding in scope but impossible in lived reality and constantly in need of adjustment. I list them here in all their fallibility:

- Notice and record simply.
- Identify; do not editorialize.

- State; do not make poetic.
- Photo evidence is not necessary; be willing to be thought a liar.
- Resist urges to exoticize, to fictionalize, or to narrate.
- Wield the gaze, and accept the blame.
- Consider what “counts.”

If nature abhors a vacuum, then it also despises human rules. Livingston’s admonition that “wildness is whole” (172) and utterly beyond the human need for organization reminds me that these rules were made for me, and by me, not for or by nature, and so the limits that I had set were constantly changing. I turned to taxonomy, but it was perplexing, especially when it seemed the most certain. Were insects fauna as I had construed it? Were reptiles? Were people? What was the place of domestic animals in FaunaWatch? Of livestock? What “counts” as significant, or worthy of mention, changes constantly with the seasons, with the location, with the weather. If the idea was to produce an accurate record, then I should list every sparrow, every robin, every grey squirrel, every omnipresent chickadee. So I changed the rule to read “list common fauna when they do something different or unusual.” That turned out to be even worse, for what is “different”? The impact of urban environments on fauna suggests that animals are constantly adapting to the presence of more trees, fewer trees, different kinds of trees, less bush, more feeders, new houses, more traffic. The amount of construction in a ten-block radius of my house on the rural edge of a small city was considerable and has included, in the last three years, the construction of four major low-rise office buildings, with accompanying parking lots, service roads, traffic signals, and road expansions, not to mention the ongoing housing development a few blocks to the west. What was “unusual” behaviour under these constantly changing conditions? I could see Canada geese and mallards all over the construction sites in the spring, swimming in the deep puddles and water-filled ditches made by various earthmovers. They appeared remarkably copacetic. I noted that some species’ response to climate change meant that my bird identification book, published in 2000, was outdated, for it noted that bald eagles were “rare to locally uncommon” in my bioregion, but as the winters became warmer, I saw five or six of these eagles per year (confirmed by sightings posted on local birder websites) — so much for the timeless habits of birds and animals.

My rules about how to post were also tested. Friends laughed when I

told them that I resist making FaunaWatch posts poetic; their laughter was a compliment, but it pointed out a rhetorical problem. How do you write the words *fox* or *goldfinch* and not trigger a bucolic response? I discovered a whole different problem with negotiating the affective appeal of certain posts as well. I have “Guest FaunaWatches” in which I will post wildlife video that underscores the mix of human and animal interaction, but I resist posting cute things domestic animals have been trained to do, and have weeded out more than one cat photo sent in by well-intentioned friends. But how, then, do I deal with the sight of a tabby hunting in the conservation area? I chose to include it in a FaunaWatch post on the basis that it was performing wildness, but that led to a reader suggestion that I, too, am performing wildness — as are the students frequenting the downtown bars, the participants in the local Pride parade, and everyone who attends Oktoberfest.

I have come up against many limits of my own, including the limits of form. When is a list not a list? How to control the impulse toward narrative? What about the problem of what can only be called “character”? Seeing picturesque and hopeful rabbits in the early spring, it’s easy to think of them as though they are the smart and serious protagonists of *Watership Down*; come summer, they turn into thieving vermin eating from gardens. And what about my own character? I have to note how I am using the animals — as psychological ballast, as writing material, as false evidence of rootedness. When I make a statement that an animal was there, that I saw it, that the animal and I shared a space — along with the even more problematic idea that the animal saw me — that statement cannot be separated from how it points to the power differential between humans and animals, and even reproduces it. How, then, to consider Derrida’s exchange of gazes which dredges up for the human “reflected shame, the mirror of a shame ashamed of itself” and causes the “abyssal rupture” (373) that eliminates all terms of simple exteriority between humans and animals? A refusal to narrate, or exoticize, may be the morally stringent position to pursue, but if the lens of the camera eroticizes the object that it reproduces, as Roland Barthes suggests, what is the lens of the human eye doing to the observed animal? When I make a list, this is undoubtedly part of mourning the animals, for to seek them out as unusual, or abundant, examples of bioregionality and name them may be another iteration of the Biblical project, as Derrida points out (388). But there is something about intimacy and perversity

that surfaces even in Derrida's view of looking with "reflected shame" at animals because of the moment of visual contact, "the moment we are making together, words such as . . . *animal* and *I*" (402).

What a relief to read Derrida's caveat immediately after that statement that a "critical uneasiness will persist" (402). It definitely does, and it is an uneasiness that I cannot think my way around. What is an exchange and what is appropriation? How does shame assist observation? Without a doubt, the problems of retaining a stable subject position in the FaunaWatch project are multiple — and endlessly multiplying. My (perhaps foolish) intentions to keep things humble have exacerbated the complexities and tensions of looking. This question of shame, of being shamed by the sight of animals running from me, is an ongoing one. Is the watcher always the implied abuser? Noting the existence of other beings has a smack of saviour complex, as though my attention gives the other a kind of life it would not have had otherwise. The project has reminded me that thinking about rootedness or presentness, like almost everything else that is important, may be absolutely necessary, but it can also be dangerously naive. I did not begin the FaunaWatch project because I believed that it would provide me with transcendence, and that is a good thing, because I have found the opposite to be true. I am increasingly wary of any perspective that suggests we are better people for our observation of the natural world. Undeniably, there is something creepily acquisitive in watching, in listing, in claiming the animals I sight as mine, even provisionally.

My sense of irony has been jump-started as well, for every opportunity that makes FaunaWatch possible is also that which makes it impossible, and vice versa. I take a walk in the woods with my naturalist friend who chatters about what can be seen in these woods so much that no birds or animals appear because of the sound of her voice. I can't find fault with this because I've done the same thing myself. I spend twenty minutes in the backyard with one of the rabbits who is brave enough (or hungry enough) not to flee, and as I speak quietly to her and admire the unusual red fur on all four of her legs, what I imagine to be our communion is undercut by the fact that my enormous, marauding species has taken up space that she (and the generations of rabbits before her) used to occupy. The biggest irony may be that often my view of nature takes place from the window provided for me by a fossil-fuel burning vehicle, frequently on the way to boarding an even bigger fossil-fuel

burning vehicle, an airplane, which always reminds me of the final lines of Atwood's "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy": "I am the space you desecrate/as you pass through" (51). But there are surprises, too: unexpected shifts that favour certain species. The major highways that cut through natural spaces become raptor corridors, as hawks and eagles take advantage of the shorter well-maintained grass beside the pavement to hunt, and turkey vultures take advantage of the frequent roadkill. This is good for FaunaWatch, but I'm not sure that we should all be singing "The Circle of Life" at this discovery; history is full of stories of species overbalance that eventually rights itself, but in the shifting sands of climate change, I wonder about the abilities of such overbalance to right itself quickly, or easily, or at all.

When I began the FaunaWatch project, I did not expect my specialty in elegiac work to have any bearing on how I wrote about what I saw, but the borders of aliveness and deadness are unavoidable when thinking about animals. A scholar who had just delivered a paper on Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* sniffed distastefully when I asked what he thought about Martel's more controversial novel *Beatrice and Virgil*. "I prefer my animals alive," he said. I do as well, but dead animals are so much a part of North American life that they cannot be dismissed as mere grotesquery or recipients of human cruelty, although they may be those as well. Alissa York and I were on our way back from seeing deer in RIM Park when we fell to discussing the role of roadkill in FaunaWatch. I have been reluctant to list the animals I see by the side of the road — so many raccoons and squirrels and rabbits and cats — but the sightings are often significant: a coyote's body feathering away to nothing on the gravel shoulder of a local road; the first possum I've ever seen by the side of the 401; the porcupine next to the TransCanada, just outside of Regina; the hindquarters of a deer in the ditch on the way up to Ontario cottage country. Alissa made the smart observation that dead animals appear prominently in two of her novels — as taxidermy subjects in *Effigy* and as roadkill in *Fauna* — not because she prefers them dead but because dead animals remain still under a prolonged gaze. You can get a good long look: something that writers and artists need. John James Audubon painted all his birds from dead models — how else? I admire David Adams Richards's memoir *Facing the Hunter: Reflections on a Misunderstood Way of Life* not because I always agree with him but because he writes convincingly about the role that class plays in people's

relationship to animals, arguing that most hunters are conservationists, and because he has made me rethink the relationship that many people in Canada have with animals as a food source. FaunaWatch, as a result, now includes the quick and the dead.

The ultimate FaunaWatch irony may be the priority granted to looking. It is hard not to look up at a cardinal flying by just because someone is talking. It is also rude to watch a cardinal in flight when you are listening to someone talk. And FaunaWatch is not immune from pretension: posturing and preening is a common practice among citizen scientists and nature writers, and while I think I am diligent about rooting this out of my posts, I can't be the one to say how successful I am at this. I know that when I read Derrick Jensen's short essay "Against Forgetting," an account of how quickly species are disappearing from the planet, I could not help but note that Jensen's anecdotal start to this brief narrative about species loss and the need for good ecological stewardship begins with a blatant example of FaunaWatch humblebragging:

Last night a host of nonhuman neighbors paid me a visit. First, two gray foxes sauntered up, including an older female who lost her tail to a leghold trap six or seven years ago. They trotted back into a thicker part of the forest, and a few minutes later a raccoon ambled forward. After he left I saw the two foxes again. Later, they went around the right side of a redwood tree as a black bear approached around the left. He sat on the porch for a while, and then walked off into the night. Then the foxes returned, hung out, and, when I looked away for a moment then looked back, they were gone. It wasn't too long before the bear returned to lie on the porch. After a brief nap, he went away. The raccoon came back and brought two friends. When they left the foxes returned, and after the foxes came the bear. The evening was like a French farce: As one character exited stage left, another entered stage right. (6.4.2)

This parade of animals is almost excessive enough to be a carnival, and Jensen's comparison of a never-ending stream of charismatic mega-fauna to a French farce casts animals as actors in a revolving-door comedy of manners with himself as bemused human butler. This is fair enough, especially since the aim is to think of the animals as familiar members of a community and urge the kind of affective connection to bioregion that he promotes in the rest of the essay. But the description of the bear sitting on the porch as it socializes with his old pal Jensen, and ambling

away only to return to nap, inches close to Disneyfication of animal consciousness. Jensen positions himself as the guru of animal observation, exhorting readers to “transpose this story to wherever you live” and to note the disappearance of non-human life and “keep [the pain] like a coal inside your coat, a coal that burns and burns.” This version of ecocritical consciousness, with its melodramatic emphasis on spiritual connections with animals, made me roll my eyes, even as I wondered how much of it I had replicated in my own posts. Jensen’s advice to “keep a calendar of who you see and when” was uncomfortably familiar, and being on the receiving end of a FaunaWatch, particularly one so shot through with insistence on the writer’s communion with animals, was a reminder to be humble, whatever that can mean in a capitalist society where even memories are acquisitive. A record is a notation; like an elegy, it does act “against forgetting,” as Jensen suggests, but we have to remember that a record neither revives life nor defies entropy.

Politics: First Person, Multiple Animals

. . . my animal figures multiply, gain in insistence and visibility, become active, swarm, mobilize, and get motivated, move and become moved all the more as my texts become more explicitly autobiographical, are more often uttered in the first person.

— Jacques Derrida, “The Animal that Therefore I Am” (403)

FaunaWatch — with its shifting rules and its hungry gaze — has made me think differently about the lyric mode and the place of living beings as tropes, or even rungs, on the lyric ladder. Asking the animals to ground me is a mug’s game. It is also clear that watching animals does not result in even momentary transcendence. Beautiful though they are, and as much as I admire the sight of them, birds do not make my heart soar with poetry; they don’t soothe my soul or justify my existence. That’s asking rather a lot of them. But it’s better to look than not, better to see than to ignore. Or is it? The strangely alienating politics of FaunaWatch has made my poetry more vulnerable to a stutter, jerkier, more given to question the manipulation of imagery. For me, it has been impossible to maintain a static idea about bodily subjectivity while considering what Dana Medoro and Alison Calder have called “the volatility of the human-animal relationship” (40). Calder’s poem “We Hate the Animals,” from her 2007 collection *Wolf Tree*, reminds readers of “scabrous sparrows, shitting pigeons,/ raccoons who strew garbage on

the lawn” (54) and serves as a testament to the urbanite’s complex and deeply ironized relationship with nature as transcendent in isolation and repulsive in interaction:

In darkness animals knock cans, chew bags,
 spread trash as if we meant it to be seen.
 They eat our trash, they are our trash,
 they must be taken out and lost, like trash.
 Oh how we hate the animals,
 hate what we think we’ve made. (54)

The tone of Calder’s final line, pointing to the control we exert over the animal image when we cannot control animal behaviour, including the ability to take them out and lose them if we want, emphasizes the problem of animal subjectivity abutted with the presence of the human. So it is Derrida’s focus on the first person, the insistence on the *I* in the act of observation, that has been drawing my attention, for it poses the most enduring question about the animal observer and the politics of looking. If the animals multiply and acquire movement, and even proximity, as the discourse becomes increasingly autobiographical, or if discourse becomes more autobiographical because the animals are more active and more plentiful, is the change occurring as a result of the gaze or in spite of it? I began the FaunaWatch project as a way to take my attention off myself, but my own autobiographical impulse has grown more explicit the longer I FaunaWatch and the more I invest in a (sometimes) alienated labour in pursuit of what I can no longer ignore as a collection. Walter Benjamin asked, “what is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?” (60). In FaunaWatch, the order of reporting, and of listing, are collector’s tools, accommodated to the chaos of *I*.

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