

CANINE CORRESPONDENCE

THE STORY OF WHAT ONE DOG THINKS ABOUT TOURING AROUND THE LOVELY, FRAGRANT DESERT OF NEW MEXICO'S WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT WITH HIS EAGER HUMAN COMPANIONS.

by JAX, as told to JONATHAN WATERMAN

On a dark thirty and we are hitting the road again. Bound for southern New Mexico you say, as if geographic place names matter to those of us in the genus *canis*.

I am flummoxed about why you always expend three days of complicated packing in preparation for an ordinary weekend backpacking trip. And like most intelligent bipeds, however beloved, why is it that you spend as much time traveling in the car as you do in our wild destination?

You talk about how excited you are "to be leaving for a national park that allows dogs," yet my barking and jumping signifies impatience rather than excitement.

Or: "How smart Jax-dog is to know that he's coming." But I would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind—or a cat—not to know that you have been preparing to leave with me because you packed exactly 10 scoops of Grain Free Natural Dog Kibbles into my canine torture-saddlebags, along with five gallons of water, and the

life is to please humans. (Eating, I confess, is a close second.) If evolution had equipped me with more powerful vocal cords and a flexible tongue, I would say that if you didn't want a chowhound you should've gotten one of those hyper-energetic herding breeds.

Despite my love of road trips, this one is over the top: We spend all day in the car. Consequently, you should expect some intestinal flatus after eight hours of no exercise, a recent snack from the cat litter box (even recycled cat food tastes better than my wretched Kibbles) and only two pee stops.

Uncountable miles and tens of thousands of missed smells later (I barked, but you still wouldn't open the windows), we are at the trailhead. I wait for you to write in the register before I lift my leg in similar comment onto the post and continue sniffing. I spent all day cooped up in the car not able to smell anything but your overpowering deodorant—I'm

"But even from within the tent, I can sense so much more: the rattlesnake slithering after a nervous pocket gopher, whistling Great Horned Owl wings and the sand scorpion clicking toward our door."

inferior nylon dish that substitutes for my usual, proper stainless steel bowl.

Last but not least—Woof, Woof!!—you loaded our car with the ultimate restraining indignity for *canis lupus familiaris* everywhere: the retractable plastic and nylon, human-dominating-animals walking device. A lesser species (your goldfish for instance) would report you to the Humane Society.

Still, my Labrador mission in

dying for more organic aromas. The ranger whose crotch I just stuck my nose into does not count.

On the post alone, you'd have to be high on doggy aspirin not to smell an obviously ovulating Lab, a poodle perishing from heat exhaustion, a twitchy dachshund, and a mentally arrested golden retriever.

The overpowering deposit of a coyote underlies all this correspondence. His Howliness comes to this trailhead nightly. Partly, I believe, to reassert his dominance.

photos by JONATHAN WATERMAN



OPEN-MINDED LANDSCAPE: ALL SPECIES APPRECIATE WHITE SANDS' EMPTINESS.

But mostly he is messaging us with the call of the wild.

In the register you scrawl and date a line about where we live. Down on the post below, I employ liquid, run-on paragraphs about who I am through pheromones designating my alpha-male status and how excited I am to be here in this new sandy place (plus a chemical signature containing information about your plastic wrapped turkey sandwich that I scarfed off the car seat).

If I could really speak (and I don't mean barking for treats and other stupid dog tricks), I would tell you about the underlying wild world of natural beauty here in the place you call White Sands National Monument. After all, my job is to identify the sights, sounds, and smells that humans miss when we venture into the backcountry.

According to the latest science about canine olfactory prowess, I have a sense of smell thousands of

times more acute than humans. And if you think my gas is powerful I would like to loan you my nose for a quick whiff.

As we hit the trail, you should know that I clip the back of your knees and knock you over while wearing these wide and unwieldy saddlebags in hopes that you'll remove this pack and its heavy water bottles, then carry it yourselves.

Meanwhile, as part of humanity's mission to keep the domesticated under rigorous supervision, you follow me with a plastic bag turned inside out over your fingers and unnaturally strain chips naturally descended from my alimentary canal out of the grass. You can't cherish this task, despite the plastic bag protection, because of your inability to discern the subtle layers of scent laced with message and meaning, contained in food recycled by all mammals. Including you.

The plodding walk of the sweating bipeds continues, with your noble



ATAVISTIC VISTA: JAX AND JON SEEK OUT A PLACE FOR SHADE AND SNACKS.

quadruped bound by various canine torture devices. But I do appreciate your oblique apology, delivered when you read aloud the trail signs: "All dogs must be on leash."

I would like to protest that you do not allow me to stop and linger over the musky, tangy spoor of 23 mammal species—skittering Apache pocket mice, fierce American badgers, or leaping Merriams kangaroo rats—who crossed our path. Nor do you seem to notice the tail dragging tracks of the bleached earless lizard, the running vectored footprints of the horned lark, the curving, capillaried trail of the

Nevada buck moth caterpillar.

To quell boredom I provide entertainment. You think that I think it is snow as I munch on the cool, white sand. If I had a human tongue and more pliable lips, I would break into laughter upon your horrified reactions. Like most of my breed, I am accustomed to playing the chump, enacting my primordial role as humankind's best friend.

We stop after a scant two miles, but I could have walked much further, even in blistering heat. Humans are such pussycats, so weirdly trained to stay on trails. You

finally remove the wretched Kibble saddlebags, soaked by leaking water. We are in a shady, dirt hollow marked as campsite "10" by another post containing such a bouquet of canine scents that I can barely process it all. A hundred feet above, white sand dunes block the sun.

I choke down my Kibbles in cold gravy then sniff and watch and drool (sorry) as you savor mac and cheese. Why could you not bring steak with the inevitable leftovers?

When the sunset comes, and light rays refract through the atmosphere into the colors you rave about (I see only blue, violet and yellow), the breeze wafts a panoply of earthy, sweet, lush and dusty fragrances of the resinous creosote bush, the soaptree yucca, and the claret cup cacti. Sand grains move over the dunes in a raspy murmur that you ignore. Somewhere in the 275-square miles of peculiar, ancient, alabaster seabed engulfing us, I inhale the scent gland rubbings of a bobcat. With my ears, you would hear the kit fox yipping to the west, along with some other campers who think that they are conversing in reverent whispers. While you focus only on the sky,

I smell and hear into dimensions concealed from human eyes.

As the sun disappears you obsessively admire the stars—okay, I admit that the night sky is glorious. But even from within the tent, I can sense so much more: the rattlesnake slithering after a nervous pocket gopher, whistling great horned owl wings and the sand scorpion clicking toward our door.

I apologize, beloved humans, for taking half of your sleeping pads, or during those rare moments that I sleep, for how my legs violently twitch in flight as I envision chasing prey across the star-lit dunes. I am also very sorry that I have deprived you of sleep, but it is my job to be alert and guard you wherever we go. I have a dream that someday you will train me to speak in words instead of my barking. Then, in our jointly evolved future, I will gently awaken you to the hidden world of wonders that calls us to the wild.

—Jax is a disciplined ski-joring athlete and in the summers he runs trails near his home in Carbondale, Colorado. He adopted author Jonathan Waterman six years ago as his companion for road trips and outdoor adventure.