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It's good to have a veterinarian in the family, particularly one who is versant in wildlife. In my case, the animal-savvy individual is a son who used to live and work in Wyoming. This week he pays a visit; an assignment had brought him to his former stomping grounds.

Walter and I were strolling up the driveway from my house in the country when we heard a rattlesnake's telltale warning. By the time we spotted the creature, it had raised itself into "strike" position.

"Whoa," said Walter. "Let's back off."

Slowly, carefully we backed away, turned, and went the other way.

"Are we going to have to kill the rattler?" I asked as we headed home. My place on what I've dubbed Windy Acres was barely a year old. When I moved here I wondered if I'd come face to face with a rattler—wildlife and birds were all around—still, this was a first.

"That snake is big, and it's close to the house," said Walter.

"Might we just let it be?"

"You have grandkids coming."

He was right. Besides his spouse and teen daughter, his brother Andy was due to arrive with children ages five and eight.

"Can you move the snake? Take it someplace where it'll leave us alone?"

"Well." Walter was thinking. "I can try."

From the garage he retrieved a four-prong rake and trashcan and hiked to the rattler spot. I hung back and watched. Once there he motioned that the snake was still around. When he set off down the road holding the can, I knew he'd been successful and went inside. He would release the snake in the fallow field a distance away from the house.

Over a beer Walter said, "A game warden once told me he moves any snake he finds near a visitors' center. He says the move stresses them out enough they'll stay away from the place."

Rattlesnakes come in an astounding variety of species. At home in most states of the U.S., their size can range from large earthworm to mid-size boa constrictor. Wyoming's high plains and mountains invite the medium-large species. In the U.S. about seven thousand people

are bitten by rattlesnakes every year but most are lucky to reach treatment in time. Walter says young rattlers are more dangerous than mature ones, for they have not yet learned to apportion their venom as they strike. The more experienced snakes always conserve a portion of their deadly weaponry.

When my son and his wife left traffic-clogged California in favor of Wyoming, Walt signed up with a wildlife agency, his spouse with the Attorney General's Office. They settled in Albany County, halfway between Laramie and Cheyenne, with acreage to keep a few horses. At 8000 feet, their home lay near the rock formation of Vedauwoo, a site sacred to the indigenous people who inhabited the area before us. During my Nashville years I once visited while on winter break. My son and I went riding across a neighbor's land to the rocky abutment of Vedauwoo but our feet got so cold in their boots, halfway there we turned back.

Walter's employment with the wildlife agency that wanted to hire him came with the caveat that he absolve a PhD at the University of Wyoming in large-animal epidemiology. "We have the funding for an extensive brucellosis study," said the agency head, who offered to oversee the project as senior veterinarian. "It'll be the perfect dissertation project for you." His dissertation director would be nationally known Elizabeth Williams, a researcher who had pinpointed the origins of Chronic Wasting Disease. Before Professor Williams put CWD on the map, the suffering animals had been derided as "zombie deer." Now elk, too, have been found carrying the disease as well.

"Her husband is a wildlife vet and expert in brucellosis," said the head honcho. "You'll be working with him in the field."

Despite the intriguing prospect, Walter was not pleased. His veterinary studies had caused him no end of grief; he was glad to have the studying and the long hours with animals behind him. Each semester anew was convinced he'd flunk out. Now he would fight study dilemmas all over again for, intent on the wildlife job, he went along with the brucellosis requirement. The fieldwork that went with the research, enjoyable as it was—one outdoor study took him into the Grand Tetons; I was lucky to accompany him—was extraordinarily time-consuming. The task was to develop a vaccine that could be administered to wildlife via hay feedings.

Brucellosis is a problem for wildlife and cattle alike. Ranchers in the Yellowstone area, worried over the transmission of the disease, are livid when bison or elk leave the park during the winter in search of food and "trespass" onto cattle ranches. If they can do it in secret, they shoot the intruders on sight. It's easy to forget that the American continent was free of brucellosis before Europeans arrived with their infected goats and sheep. The disease can be life-threatening to humans: Victor Hugo's Hunchback of Notre Dame survived brucellosis at the cost of a deformed body that likely caused him a lifetime of pain. Indeed, Walter and his team contracted the disease despite protective clothing and gear as they pulled a dead fetus from an infected elk cow. When Walter and the senior veterinarian noted symptoms like excruciating backaches, the head vet went to his doctor but the physician shrugged him off. "No one gets brucellosis anymore," he said. "You've got the flu." So Walter and the head vet took samples of their own blood, analyzed them, and pinpointed the antibodies. Within a day all team members got the

appropriate treatment.

Sadly, in winter 2004, Dr. Williams and Dr. Thorne lost their lives when an oncoming sixteen-wheeler slipped on black ice and plowed into their truck. At the news, all outdoor and wildlife communities went into mourning, including Walter and his erstwhile brucellosis team. The state renamed its Sybille Research Center in memory of the two scientists, and the following year they were inducted into the Outdoor Hall of Fame, of which a clip exists on YouTube showing the wildlife specialists at work.

My rattlesnake problem, it turned out, was not solved with my son's charitable deed. Not quite, anyway. A week or two after my dear ones had returned to their respective homes in Texas and California, I heard my dog bark furiously in the basement. Her sleeping quarters are down there, and sometimes she goes for a midday nap. Since Abby wouldn't quit her ruckus, I went downstairs to check what was the matter. On the concrete floor a baby rattler raised itself up and rattled its tiny appendage.

Once before, when a baby snake found its way into the basement, I grabbed a square bucket and stick, scooped up the wriggling thing, and took it outside. I think it was a garden snake, but who knows. Now I repeated the operation but, rather than deposit the baby rattler outside my home, I carried it to the meadow where Walter had taken the adult snake. Later that day Abby was barking again downstairs. This time I spotted a tiny snakehead among the rafters. No way was I going to reach it up there. The next day, however, it had ventured to the floor, where I gathered and took it away like its sibling.

There must be a regular snake-family reunion down in that meadow. The adult rattler Walter removed must have been a mama rattler, which means a daddy rattler isn't far off. I'm hoping the raptors undertake what I don't have the heart to do, but that may be wishful thinking. Rattlers, my ranching neighbors tell me, are plentiful hereabouts.

What would my son say about baby rattlers in the basement? Keep your eyes peeled? Pray they don't grow into mama and daddy rattlers? Oh yeah.