

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Canadian Prairie: Traveling with Beau

Author's Note: This is the fifth in a series of stories reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau.¹ During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
October 21, 2014

Day Five (Saskatchewan)

We rose at four and headed northwest, anxious to reach to the Canadian border before sunrise. The smoke of the previous day had been replaced by a dense mist that clung like a grey fleece to the Des Lacs River on our right. The two-lane road ran along the meandering waterway, filling me with a sense of euphoria that I had not experienced thus far in our journey. Reflecting on the peace that envelops the soul in the quiet before dawn, I realized this was the wilderness into which I had wanted to submerge my thoughts.

Ducks cluttered every pond, every quiet bend in the river. Some were solitary, some in clusters, but all bobbed their little heads incessantly into the water like mechanical toys. As the jeep passed by, we would either see an upright duck, a headless duck with tail feathers pointing to the withering moon, or a duck in rotary transition. Beau would have been amused by the sight, but instead he slept like a puppy after a vigorous romp. His legs twitched occasionally, as if he was dreaming of chasing the deer that take residence on our front lawn, feasting on our flowers and vegetables.

Though I was well rested, my eyes did tricks on me as the dawn gradually displaced the charcoal sky. I periodically slapped my cheeks and lowered the window to allow the damp breeze to rush across them.

Seeing a brilliant flashing yellow light ahead of me, I slowed to prepare for what I assumed was a construction truck traveling north in front of us. The distance between our vehicles closed rapidly, however, and I realized with horror that the lights were bearing down the middle of the road toward us. Barely escaping impact and with an ugly horn blaring at us, I veered onto the right shoulder and careened around the unswerving truck. It appeared to be a road-cleaner with giant sweepers on its front bumper. It was the closest we came to an accident the entire trip.

Arriving at the border hamlet of Portal at 6:45 am, we stopped for gas before approaching the

small customs house. A ranch truck pulling a loaded horse trailer had just cleared U.S. customs from the north, and three salty-tongued women had climbed down from their truck for a stretch and a smoke. One took a long drag on her cigarette and came over to pet Beau. When he withdrew from her hand, she gave me an unkind look then turned back to her rig and bent low under the trailer to inspect its underbelly. I quickly topped off the jeep's fuel tank and pulled up to the waiting immigration and customs office that was just opening for the day.

As was typical of each of my four border crossings into Canada, the interrogation was brief and friendly. "Any firearms in the vehicle?" "No sir." "Any alcohol?" "No sir." "Do you have more than ten thousand dollars in cash?" Beau hardly had time to rise and wag his tail before we were back in Canada, about to enter the great Canadian prairie.

Saskatchewan was always a hard word for me to spell, more difficult than Mississippi. My mother would sometimes sit facing me in our kitchen on a cold winter night, our bodies warmed by the wood stove that remain stoked until the last child went to bed. She would quiz me on multiplication tables, on the names of Canada's lakes and rivers and mountains, and their spelling. When it came to the wheat province, she would say: "Donald, think of it as a sequence of four three-letter syllables. *Sas*, like *sis* only with an 'a'; *kat*, like a *cat* only with a 'k'; *chew*, okay that's four letters, but you make up for it by repeating the 'w' in the final syllable, *wan*. On this August morning decades later, I recalled with remarkable clarity the touch of her hands and her unwavering love. Due to circumstances that were unknown to me on this August morning, I would drive to be with her in Toronto on my return trip from Alaska.



Wheat harvester near Estevan, Saskatchewan, 15 km from the US border
(Photo by the author, 2007)

We were crossing southern Saskatchewan during harvest time. Large combine harvesters rolled across the pan-flat prairie, and immense silos offloaded wheat to waiting rail cars along the rural roads. Beau sat upright, fascinated by the sounds, the motion of the massive farm vehicles and the occasional clouds of wheat dust. This was one of his happiest days of the trip and he alternated between looking out the front window of the jeep and peering obliquely through the side window into the rear view mirror. He would look back and forth between what was behind and what lay ahead. I thought of Winston Churchill who ascribed to the notion that we could never hope to forecast the future without a clear sense of where we had traveled.



*A quiet lunch on the spacious grounds
of the Parliament buildings in Regina, Saskatchewan*
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Shortly after noon, we pulled into Regina, the provincial capital. A friendly pair of Royal Canadian Mounted Police took a liking to Beau and suggested that we have a picnic on the grounds of the parliament buildings. The lawns were vacated during harvest season, so we spread out our blanket and had a quiet lunch of cheese and chicken. I was awakened from a deep sleep by Larry, a former member of the legislature, who had been jogging by with his Siberian Husky and stopped to meet Beau. We talked for a long time—well *he* talked—and shared his perceptions of American politics from a Canadian's point of view.

Along the 260 km stretch from Regina to Saskatoon, I debated whether we should splurge on a hotel that evening. I favored a warm shower and hot dinner. However, a few kilometers south of Saskatoon, I spotted a large wetland to the east. Though approaching dusk, we drove around the backside of a marshy area where scores of white pelicans and hundreds of ducks were resting on a sand bar. “Pelicans this far north,” I mused as I backed the jeep into to a grove of small trees. Out of sight from the road, we set up our little tent.



A secluded sandbar with pelicans south of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Near midnight, I stepped outside to see the Big Dipper balanced delicately on its handle amongst a million other stars. As I was following the path to the North Star, I felt Beau's soft fur against my leg and we watched the night sky together.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sept 9, 2014.
Smith, Donald F. Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sept 11, 2014.
Smith, Donald F. From Ontario to Wisconsin: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 16, 2014.
Smith, Donald F. A Lesson in Humility: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 17, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Human-animal bond
One Health
Traveling with a dog
Alaska Highway
Alaska
Anchorage

TOPICS:

One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

What western Canadian province is known for its wheat production?

META-SUMMARY:

The author continues his journey across America with his dog across the Canadian prairie.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.