

Nice day. Long's Peak is winking down on Boulder and the winds have blown away any tell-tale brown. Crisp, clean air. Everyone in town seems to be bagging a peak, riding a century or red-pointing some slab of rock. It's like we're all in a Ford Explorer ad: Have a latte, climb a mountain. Many comply, and I'm no different, burning off my gourmet-cafe, two-fisted muffin on my bicycle. As I ride up Highway 36, the road that skirts the Front Range between Boulder and Rocky Mountain National Park, a steady stream of cars parallels my route. They zoom by at sixty, seventy, eighty miles per hour, in an espresso rush to hit the trailhead first.

A few white clouds creep over the Indian Peaks, pulled along by winds I can barely feel. A whoosh of air surges by, and then I hear the roar of the semi engine as it chugs into a different gear. I look beyond the shoulders of the road, focus on the scenery. As I pass through the Open Space boundary that surrounds the city like a donut, I note a kestrel eying the bumper crop of grasshoppers while some hang-gliders prepare to jump from the terminus of the foothills.

A bike racer, I'm on the roads nearly every day and I usually see an abundance of species, avian and otherwise. Today, within the first hour, I see a meadowlark and a white-crowned sparrow, as well as a milk snake, a rattlesnake, and a coyote. I spot a delicate yellow-green butterfly I have no name for, a monarch butterfly, grasshoppers of every size and color, and beetles.

Unfortunately, it isn't wildlife I'm seeing, but the wild dead—casualties of the road. The small milk snake, no older than the summer, was a frozen S-coil of black, red and white, killed just short of a grassy expanse. The big black beetle—the kind we used to call stink bugs—was on its back, legs still. The coyote was but a shadowy outline, stretched out near a yucca plant as if it were a pet dog laying by a fire. As I keep pedaling I see more: a ribcage and numerous furry patches nearly meld with the pavement; a greasy stain and a striped tail are all that remain of a raccoon. More than five miles of

Nelson Road are bordered by white feathers. Goose? Chicken? Who knows. The feathers have been scattered by the wind and snagged by some reeds growing near a lake. I glimpse a deer lying in the ditch at roadside. Its head looking toward me, chin on green grass, eyes still open.

I realize I've seen more snakes dead on the roads of Boulder County than alive—more animal species in Colorado dead on the roads than alive, period. In the past week I've seen not only dead coyote and deer, but prairie dog, house wren, lazuli bunting, mice.

Once, I argued with a fellow writer about the rights of animals and people on the road. He was an avid motorcyclist in addition to being a bicyclist, and was worried about the numbers of people who hit deer. The deer almost always died in these collisions; sometimes the people did, too. "Stupid animals," he'd muttered, after hearing of a friend's recent accident. "They should shoot the deer before they get near a road." I was outraged. When the conversation flamed into an argument he said, "You must hate people." He questioned my sanity as I defended the right of a deer to try and get to the other side of a road.

*Mortality sinks*, I think, *open burial grounds*, remembering a long-ago natural history lecture on roads and wildlife. I saw a map recently of all the roads in Colorado. It looked like someone had grabbed a handful of worms out of a bucket and thrown them at the page. I could barely make out the space between the lines that represented land.

I start eying the cars whizzing by, checking for blood on the bumpers. Many have grills crusted with too many insect bodies to count. I shiver despite the warm sun. I'm not the only cyclist I know who's been hit by a car; I know how hard the pavement is.

Coming back into town I see the same kestrel, still observing the road from a fence. I say a silent prayer for the bird and pedal home, dragging my rear wheel between my legs like a tail. ■

## Mortality Sinks

■ DEBORAH CROOKS

MARK GAHAGEN PHOTO

