The Littlest Grebe

In a bay tucked far far away in the upper reaches of Lake Powel, it was two days before Christmas and not a boat in sight. In fact none had been seen in weeks. Hite Marina, the closest bay access, now existed only as memory, a dismantled victim of low water levels, and it was a long, long way from Bullfrog, the next closest boat entry. After a long summer run, human visitors had retreated, allowing the bay to finally sigh and rest in peace.

Almost magically, animals reclaimed center stage. The bay soon transformed into a scenic motel for snowbirds fleeing south for winter, real snowbirds not the Sun City variety. Coyotes romped openly, chasing every shadow in sight. Flaunting status in broad daylight, this king predator was subtly reminding all others who was boss. Grebes, no longer confined to flocks, seemed to be bobbing up and down everywhere, regardless of where one looked. And the ravens...well the ravens were raising hell with everyone because there were no people to pick on. Not to hot and never too cold, it was prime time for those dressed in fur or feathers.

It was a pastoral scene

Even Humberto had returned and could be seen grazing on the hillside while exploring holes in the ground. Humberto was a burro, originally part of the San Juan River herd. Unfortunately, one day while drinking at waters edge, a piece of rock from a cliff above, broke loose and clobbered him. He survived but was left traumatized with a foreboding fear of water, he never went too close anymore, and suffered from a severe case of amnesia. He subsequently wandered off in the wrong direction, showed up months later in this neck of the lake, and had never since been able to find his way home.

After his accident, Humberto had been left with no memory of who he was, what he looked like or what his kind looked like. His lone faint memory was that of being an ass, but had no conception of what type of creature that was or what it was supposed to look like. However, one evening while grazing within earshot of a houseboat he heard two people quarreling and one said to the other, “You don’t know the difference between your ass and a hole in the ground!” From that conversation he assumed those two objects must have some degree of similarity, and consequently, from then on spent most of his free time locating and gazing into holes in the ground, hoping to eventually gain some insight into his identity.

Humberto wasn’t the only indigenous “character” around. Invariably, it seemed every year each resident species would have one youngster who wouldn’t conform, and though reluctantly tolerated by others, was considered to be a pest. For instance, there was Sedgewick, the littlest grebe, the runt of the flock. He was smart, even smarter than most adults. But other grebes soon learned never to turn their backs to him. His sense of humor could pique the serenity of a saint. Neither age nor status offered protection; all were fair game for this relentless trickster. Nevertheless, he was a source of amusement provided you weren’t the current victim of one of his pranks. His redeeming feature was an empathetic heart. As such, he was loved for his big heartedness, but feared as a prankster.
Recently Sedgewick discovered an l.e.d. headlamp, evidently lost by a night fisherman, which was still on and working. (If you haven’t tried one they’ll stay on for months before the batteries wear down) He’d wait until after dark, put on the headlamp, and sneak up under-water on some unaware flock member carelessly paddling in bliss. Then without warning, suddenly pop up right in front of the unexpecting victim, with headlamp shining right into the victim’s eyes, and roar QUEEK! (QUEEK! Is what a grebe says when it roars) This would cause the unexpected victim’s feathers to stand straight up on end and its eyes to bug out, while simultaneously diving under water in terror and uncontrollably staining the water. Victims would vehemently curse his impetuousness, while Sedgewick would grin and claim he was only feeding plankton.

PJ was the coyote pup prankster. His favorite trick would occur during howling practice. Most people are unaware that coyotes take howling practice very seriously. We’ve all heard them sing and practice their unique brand of harmony. During howling practice PJ would wait until the last howler had joined the final crescendo and at that moment soundly bite the nearest tail around. The resulting tail owner’s howl would suddenly switch to something more akin to the crow of a rooster. Fortunately PJ possessed a lot of natural speed.

Squeaky was the raven youngster that stood out from the rest. Born with a speech impediment, his name stemmed from an inability to speak raven fluently. Being a prankster wasn’t his style, but was blessed, or cursed, depending upon your viewpoint, with an unusual amount of curiosity, even for a raven, and became a ravenous (that’s not a pun) collector.

When blessed with an overabundance of food, ravens are notorious for taking that which is too much to eat, stashing it somewhere then covering it with rocks or pebbles. Squeaky collected things, instead of food. Anything that shined or sparkled or stood out in any way he collected, stashed and hid. He had a stash for coins, one for fishing lures, another for watches, for credit cards, for silverware, etc., etc. Ransacked without mercy was the unavoidable fate destined for any houseboat left unattended in this bay. The value of Squeaky’s secreted stashes soon rivaled that of King Solomon’s mines.

Temporarily, nature had reclaimed the bay.

It was a pastoral scene

Meanwhile, up at the Pole, it wasn’t as tranquil. Santa had a big problem. The flu vaccine shortage threatened to shut down Christmas. His reindeer had all come down with the flu, they wouldn’t even budge.

Circumstances were grim. But all was not lost, his elf engineers, best engineers in the world, had come up with a contingency plan. In less than a day they retrofitted his sleigh into sort of a stealth jet-helicopter. It flew fast, hovered, and ran silently. Equipped with a
GPS even Rudolph was no longer needed. An icon of the past would soon be just another relic in antiquity.

As Santa examined his new sleigh a tear came to his eye. It just wouldn’t be the same without Rudolph… without his bright red shining nose… lighting the way. Reminiscing, he went back to when he first got his team and how all the reindeer had bright red shining noses. But over the years, since none of the other reindeer could stop as fast as Rudolph, Rudolph eventually became the only reindeer left whose nose still shined. The last of his kind. And now, now it appeared poor Rudolph was destined to become just another legend of his time abandoned to history. “I suppose I’m next,” Santa mused. “Soon I won’t be delivering presents by sleigh. I’ll just be digitalized and down loaded.”

“Enough of this sentimentality,” Santa exclaimed, “only two days before Christmas and I’ve got a practice run to make. All right you elves, let’s gas up and load up! The presents are ready, throw them all in. This is a full simulation. I’ve got to find out now, any kinks that exist, while there’s time to fix them. Tomorrow night is show time!”

At dusk he turned the key in the ignition, the engine purred, the sleigh lifted off, headed south.

This sleigh ruled! The weather had been calm and in seemingly no time at all he had streaked thru Canada and was now over the States. Then the first “kink” surfaced. Wind! A sleigh loaded with bags of presents is not the most aerodynamic of vehicles. The sleigh was being tossed around like an out-of-control kite.

Wind had never been a problem in the past, Santa pondered. Then he realized his reindeer always flew under free rein and instinctively adjusted altitude to avoid wind and inclement weather conditions. Machines didn’t have instinct. He assumed it was a fixable problem back at the Pole. Tinkering with altitude levels, it didn’t take long before he discovered a flyable altitude and headed back. His sleigh turned around right over Lake Powell.

Meanwhile, back at the bay, Squeaky and a several other juveniles had sneaked away from the flock and were smoking sagebrush up on the hill. It was some good stuff. At the very top of the hill the coyotes were now midway through howling practice, in prep for their Christmas Eve concert. The raven youngsters, feeling no inhibitions to adventure, came up with a scheme to liven up the evening. It had been a good houseboat season for Squeaky and his collecting and he’d accumulated quite a stash of fireworks. They crept close to the choir and set up the fireworks. They would be lit just after the climax of the last howling crescendo. It would probably startle the coyotes at first, but then they should enjoy it: a good way to top off a fine performance.

And so they did. Oh, it was quite a show. Squeaky’s fireworks stash was considerable. It was by far the best display the bay had ever witnessed, but ended up sadly marred by an unfortunate act of fate. Unbeknown to the spectators at the time, one of the rockets hit Santa’s sleigh and fried the engine. Yes, believe it or not, a bunch of juvenile ravens had shot down Santa Clause with a firecracker!
When the sleigh’s engine shut down it triggered a fail-safe system that deployed a parachute. The sleigh drifted down slowly, landing on shore not far from waters edge. Unfortunately the landing pitched Santa out, causing his head to hit on a rock knocking him out cold. He wasn’t discovered until dawn.

The ravens discovered the wreckage first and couldn’t believe the bonanza. Thousands of wrapped presents scattered everywhere. This exceeded their #1 rated fantasy of finding a fully loaded garbage barge, piled high with bags of garbage waiting to be torn open, unguarded. They circled cautiously, something wasn’t quite right; soon their caws of excitement woke everyone else. Trotting up, the coyotes stared in disbelief then began licking their chops.

“Look at the hams on the fat guy,” one growled.
“But that’s Santa,” PJ whispered.
“The meat looks tough, but check out the fat content. Looks like I’ll finally be able to start on the Atkins Diet,” said another.
“But that’s Santa,” whispered Squeaky.
A quarrel broke out.
“First dibs on a leg!”
“No way, you had first dibs last time!”

The coyote quarreling intensified and the ravens began circling to land. When all of a sudden there was a mighty roar that shook the whole Bay,

“Queek!!”

Everyone turned and stared in amazement as Sedgewick unhesitant, walked out of water and onto shore. Two locals fainted, several crossed themselves, someone shouted, “Alleluia” and another followed with “Amen!” In animal world this was akin to walking on water, they had just witnessed as big a miracle as one can expect. For you see, grebes can’t walk on shore! Have you ever seen one? Coots, yes, but grebes?… of course not. The reason is, grebes have extremely tender feet that are instantly sunburned to the bone upon being exposed to sunlight. And, the bottoms of their feet are so tender that they get sliced to ribbons just walking on sand.

Sedgewick stood in front of them, hands on hips and said, ”I can’t believe you guys. Have you forgotten what Christmas is all about?? It’s the birthday celebration of a Savior who taught the world love. And in remembrance, Santa spreads love in the form of gifts to little children all over the world. And you want to eat him?… and tear open his gifts? Where’s the love???”

Believe it or not the ravens’ faces actually turned red as they stared at the ground. The coyotes solemnly turned their heads away and began slinking with tails between their legs. All were somber except for PJ who couldn’t help but giggle; he wasn’t used to slinking with his tail between his legs and he was ticklish. Finally someone turned spokes-animal
for the group and said to Sedgewick, “We’re sorry. We forgot we were animals. What can we do to help?”

About that time, Santa propped himself up on one elbow. He wasn’t unconscious; he’d been faking it. He had the ability to make any animal fly, and knew these creatures were possibilities, but first had to be certain they had the right kind of heart. Now he knew. Turning to Sedgewick he said “Sedgewick. With your l.e.d. lamp so bright, won’t you guide my sleigh tonight?” Sedgewick agreed. Then he motioned to Humberto, who came bounding down from the hill, and made a little saddle for Sedgewick that strapped down right behind Humberto’s ears. Then he made a harness for his team. Humberto with Sedgewick would lead, followed by 3 pair of coyotes, each pair side by side and following the pair in front, and finally Santa and his sleigh.

Santa had his team and it was quite a sight. A grebe wearing a headlamp, strapped to the head of a flying jackass harnessed to a pack of flying coyotes. A sight more seemingly appropriate to occur in the Rocky Horror Picture Show Halloween Party than in The Night Before Christmas story, but it worked.

And so if on Christmas Eve night, instead of the jingle of sleigh bells you should happen to hear.

    Queek! Hee Haw! And Arooooooo!!

Don’t be frightened. It’s just Santa and the Lake Powell volunteers coming to town.

    Merry Christmas!