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Johnson took readers on outdoor adventures

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The bear had seen me first, that much was certain. So why was it still coming my way?

With those words, Milwaukee Sentinel outdoor writer Don L. Johnson began a story in his "Alaska Alone" series in 1976, displaying the fascination and respect for the natural world that were hallmarks of his writing.

During an award-winning newspaper career that spanned more than 30 years, Johnson boated down the Amazon, canoed through the Badlands of North Dakota and dog sledded across the Minnesota wilderness. He heard howler monkeys sing in Ecuador, watched baboons march single file in Kenya and went bonefishing in Cuba.

In prose that revealed his deep love of nature, Johnson took thousands of Wisconsin readers with him on these adventures and opened their eyes to environmental threats posed by DDT and mercury.

Johnson died Friday at his home in Menomonie, where he'd been battling cancer and Parkinson's disease. He was 78.

"Johnson was, and is, one of the most respected conservation voices ever to be sounded in Wisconsin, which puts him in the company of the likes of Gordon MacQuarrie, Ernest Swift, Aldo Leopold and Mel Ellis," the late Jay Reed, outdoor writer for The Milwaukee Journal, wrote as Johnson planned to leave the Sentinel in 1984.

"Anybody who hunts or fishes in Wisconsin or enjoys any of the outdoor recreation this state provides owes this man something," Reed declared. "And that includes me."

"He was an outstanding writer," said Bill Windler, senior editor for sports at the Journal Sentinel and previously sports editor at the Sentinel. "What I remember most is that he tackled everything with enthusiasm. . . . He was both a great outdoors guy and a great journalist."

Master storyteller that he was, Johnson took readers into the path of an oncoming Alaskan brown bear.

The light was still poor but any bear picture was better than none. I made a couple of exposures, marveling at the speed with which a rambling bear covers ground.

Johnson himself covered a lot of ground in his life and work.

Born March 18, 1927, he grew up in Milwaukee County, but spent much of his boyhood on family farms in Dodge and Buffalo counties, hunting and fishing.

"Although he was born in the city, he had some natural affinity for the outdoors," said his son, Douglas Johnson. "That really became his world."

Don Johnson graduated from Nathan Hale High School in West Allis, then served with the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific during World War II.

In 1949, he married Lorraine Senn. Their families had known each other for years.

The couple had a son, Douglas, and a daughter, Lynn.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he studied both conservation and journalism, Johnson worked for several newspapers in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. He joined the Milwaukee Sentinel as outdoor writer in 1962.

Forty yards . . . 30 . . . directly downwind. And headed my way.

I snapped a head-on picture, suddenly aware that the viewfinder was becoming filled with bear.

A rugged man, 6 feet tall, with a booming voice, Johnson followed his interest in nature to places such as the Everglades and Ecuador, Kenya and Cuba.

Exposing environmental threats

Closer to home, he reported on more than just fishing and hunting. His hard-hitting conservation work included an audit of the state's deer registration system, an exposé of mercury pollution in the Wisconsin River, and a series on pesticide pollution. In 1966, Johnson wrote about high concentrations of DDT in state waters.

Despite threats of lawsuits and demands that he be fired, Johnson kept pursuing his environmental stories.

"Dad was a very tenacious individual," his son said. "He just plowed forward."

The pesticide was eventually banned in Wisconsin.

But no threat seemed more immediate than a fast-moving bear in Iliamna, Alaska.

"That's far enough," I said, using the tone I'd use to admonish my springer spaniel. I raised my left hand like a traffic cop. With my right I was unsnapping the safety strap on the holster on my hip.

Johnson began telling about how big the bear was and how close. At 30 feet, the scar on its nose was plainly visible. Johnson's .357-magnum revolver seemed little more than a toy. A shot over the bear's head did not deter it, and Johnson was forced to consider trying to shoot the animal.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" I roared, feeling anger rise to overwhelm fear. The gun was gripped in both hands. Cocked. He would not knock it away before I fired . . .

Later other stories would pack a different kind of emotional punch, including those about his beloved dogs, Dash, Chips and Brighton.

He also wrote about introducing his new daughter-in-law, a petite nursery school teacher from Texas, to the joys of salmon fishing on Lake Michigan. She brought in a 17 ½ pounder that fought like a rodeo bronco.

Johnson noted with interest that Carolyn measured her fish with outstretched arms, practicing just how the story would be told back home.

"So it looks like we've got another real fisherperson in the family," Johnson wrote. "A mite small, but a keeper for sure."

In bear country, Johnson's story was reaching its climax.

My thoughts raced.

But I had not been charged or even threatened, except by the bear's boldness. Its ears were erect, not laid back. It had uttered no snarls, bared no fangs.

Then the bear wheeled and ran. Really ran. . . . I snapped the camera at the big rump as it disappeared over the next knoll.

Painting pictures with words

In a postscript, Johnson later mourned the loss of all his bear pictures to moisture leaking into the double-wrapped camera. Photos gone, he painted word pictures instead.

As Johnson considered retirement in 1984 - his editors persuaded him to take a year of leave, hoping he would return. Johnson wrote about his plans.

"First, I intend to spend more time puttering, weeding in the garden, picking on the guitar, scratching the dog's ears and considering what to do next," he then said. "I am weary now, of deadlines."

"The common view is that an outdoor writer's life is an endless paid vacation," Johnson continued. "That is not quite true. It is an often hectic calling. Like any news reporter's job, it entails many things which don't show in the product - time spent traveling, digging, attending meetings, spinning wheels."

Kept on writing

He did not return to the Sentinel, but did not give up writing, freelancing articles and photographs to numerous magazines. In November 2005, a collection of Johnson's essays - including some never before published - saw print as "Summer's Song & Other Essays."

The Audubon Society recognized his investigative work in 1974, "for accurate interpretive reporting on behalf of all life on earth." His many honors included the coveted Gordon MacQuarrie Foundation Award "for telling the conservation story."

In 2000, Wisconsin Outdoor Journal named him one of the 20 people who had the greatest influence on hunting and fishing in the state during the 20th century, and in May 2005, the Natural Resources Board recognized his contributions to conserving the state's natural resources.

"You see, I have always had this compulsion to see what is around the next bend; over the next hill," Johnson wrote in his final column for the Sentinel. "And now this fork in the trail beckons."

"But I will look back sometimes, and remember where we've been, and smile."

Just being outdoors

In his last year, Johnson still managed to accompany friends on hunting trips, "just being in the outdoors, which was always more important to him than shooting a gun or bringing something home," his son said.

Johnson is survived by Lorraine, his wife of 56 years; son Douglas Johnson of Maryland; daughter Lynn Carlson of Manitowoc; four grandchildren; two sisters, Joyce Swenson of Floral City, Fla., and Darlene Zache of Hartland.

A memorial service will be held at the Olson Funeral Home, 615 Wilson Ave. in Menomonie, at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

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