

Loose Lips and Eavesdropping Dogs

By Dennis Payton Knight

As humans we have a tendency to talk when we should not, and to hang listening in the eaves when we should not. It's a characteristic that inspired the phrase, "Loose lips sink ships," created during World War II by our country's War Advertising Council. Posted everywhere at military installations and wartime manufacturing plants, it was advice well taken by soldiers and sailors, by Rosie the Riveter, and other civilians, too.

We come by eavesdropping naturally as it is ubiquitous in nature itself. In a 2004 article for *National Geographic News*, John Pickrell reported how a primate species and a bird species in West Africa listen to the chatter, hoots and squawks of each other to learn of approaching predators. They may not be communicating directly, but the eavesdrop relationship has become so symbiotic that Diana monkeys and Hornbills often perch together in the same trees.

In a 2012 guest blog in *Scientific American*, titled "The Art of Eavesdropping: Nature's Silent Sniffers, Watchers and Listeners," Jennifer Verdolin rats out snooperiness of all sorts in the animal kingdom. While she does not say so in her article, I suspect she got the juice by doing some eavesdropping of her own.

Dr. Verdolin documents how, between two particular species of bees, those of the larger genus create busy-bee efficiency by avoiding food sources that have already been exploited by bees of the smaller variety. It is a matter of observing trails previously taken. She then reports how pocket mice steal from kangaroo rats, and how pine chipmunks help themselves to the loot of ground squirrels' caches. Often, these advantages are achieved by smell, but it is the successful eavesdropper who can use all his senses to gather the news.

There are always eavesdroppers lurking in the animal kingdom. A raven, concealed among leafy branches, watches to learn where a critter stores its food, makes a note of it in his large spatial memory, flies away, then returns later to raid the hoard when nobody is home.

Verdolin told of a team which examined whether, through social eavesdropping, dogs adjust their behavior when observing humans interacting with each other. In experiments, dogs eavesdropped on one person begging food from two others. The 'selfish' human would share nothing, while the 'generous' one would give food freely to the beggar. The dogs were later observed as to whether it would be the selfish or the generous person they wagged to for sausages. The dogs wasted no time with the 'selfish' humans, but approached the generous ones more frequently and interacted with them longer.

I often enjoy the hospitality of my sister, who is also my neighbor. We share a little pooch named Meeka. Meeka has eavesdropped as I begged lunch at Maureen's, and she has thus identified my sister as a go-to person who smilingly provides food upon request. Meeka has me pegged as the curmudgeon who snickers and drives innocent humans and dogs to dentists.