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Our World: Animal instincts more powerful than we will ever know

- By TRISTAN SPINSKI
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Nancy J. Smith first noticed her coyote's peculiar behavior during an educational visit to Naples Park Elementary School several years ago. Smith, the founder and president of Shy Wolf Sanctuary in Golden Gate Estates, a refuge for abandoned and neglected wolves, coyotes and other wildlife, brought along Amaya, a now 9-year-old coyote-dog mix. Because of Amaya's good disposition, Smith wanted to use her to teach the children about wolves, coyotes and the importance of good stewardship in protecting and caring for these animals.

MORE INFORMATION

Amaya is currently up for adoption at Shy Wolf Sanctuary. For more information on Amaya, any of the other wolves and wolf-dogs at the sanctuary, visiting the sanctuary or volunteering, call (239) 455-1698, or visit the website at shywolfsanctuary.com.

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Amaya quickly lost interest in the crowd of kids, and singled out one little girl sitting in a stroller.

"It was like everything else was blanked out," Smith said. "She didn't want anything to do with anyone except that child."

Smith said Amaya approached the child and started "talking." Smith mimicked the sound of Amaya's "talking" with a friendly-sounding whine that rolls into a continuous half bark and carried on for a few seconds.

As Amaya "talked" to the little girl, she put her paw on her.

"She was saying: 'It's OK. It's OK'," Smith said. "She was happy to be with that child and didn't want her to be scared."

After the visit, Smith found out the child Amaya had identified out was autistic.

Since that first school visit, Smith said Amaya has continued to single out children during group tours of Shy Wolf Sanctuary. Smith said she has witnessed at least a dozen instances of Amaya hopping onto her bench during a group tour and "talking" to a specific child.

"We'll then ask the parents if their child is autistic," Smith said. "The answer is always 'yes'."

"I think she can pick up on their energy. I have no scientific data to prove it. This is from the heart. I have no proof. But I've seen it."

If a child shows fear, Smith said Amaya turns her back to them so they can pet her without having to see her face. She will continue to do that until people are comfortable.

"She can feel their fear," Smith says. "It's amazing what she does to calm their fear."

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