

## **The Great Mystery Of The Illinois Wolfen**

**By Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.**

Wilder than the wolf, bear and cougar suffocated from this land more than a hundred years ago, a yet-to-be catalogued life form makes its way through bottomland forests. Hidden by day in the dense growth of hardwoods along the Illinois and its tributaries, the Sangamon and Spoon, they wait for dark. Even now I shudder to think they might know I've broken a solemn pact. Perhaps this breach will come to naught. After all, who would believe there are wolfen in Illinois?

The passion of the hunt found me standing among cottonwoods on the river bank waiting for sunrise when I heard their peculiar, muffled cries. Not the bark of dogs nor the howl of the coyote or wolf but more like the finely orchestrated chorus of jackals keeping their ranks intact while scouring the savannas for gazelle fawns hidden in clumps of grass. Through the dim magenta light, a white-tail buck ran out of the willows along the levee into the field and stopped directly in front of me, its chest heaving and tongue draping. The buck caught my eye for a moment before they rushed into the field, and then bounded into the next stand of forest surrounded by an inverted phalanx of wolfen.

Coal-black, sleek and uniform, they have long legs and thin bodies, and weigh about forty pounds each. Conformed like the Cape hunting dogs of Africa, they are perfectly designed to hunt deer. Some wildlife biologists would say that they are domestic dogs gone wild for generations, filling a void left by the hand of European man on less wary hunters of this once most productive watershed of Turtle Island. I know better. They course deer with precision far beyond the faculty of Illinois dogs, and in the heat of the chase they call back and forth to one another so softly that no farmer could ever hear them. More intelligent than the wolf, they never attack livestock, and they always kill deer in the dense bottomlands where no one may see their ceremonial feasts. The wolfen's bite-the-lip courage goes so far as to tolerate the clumsy intrusions of farmers' dogs pretending to hunt deer, and looking back on all the times I stalked deer with a bow before sunrise where they must have been lurking I wonder if other men were treated as mercifully.

That morning when eight of them ran by me, for a split-second my instinctive urge was to shoot the deer, then to intervene on behalf of it, but these archaic impulses yielded to the profound realization that I was witness to a Great Mystery. No doubt the wolfen could have killed me. They not only spared me that day, but also initiated me into the Brotherhood of the River. The wolfen and I agreed to hold out for another time yet to come in this Sacred Place. Until then, our duty is to hunt silently in the dark. Known only to me among the two-leggeds, the Illinois wolfen are my special totem, my other spirit-self sitting even now beneath a pecan tree on that far away river.