

Man's best friend.

Everyone has heard about them, and many believe in the truth of the saying, after having shared their lives with a domesticated wolf. By 'man' of course, is meant the human race, not men as a gender.

However, strictly speaking, the saying is not true. Dogs are not man's best friend. They are man's *only* friend. In the entire world and universe beyond, there is no other species of creature that considers human-kind a friend. Every other animal, if it has any sense and the ability to flee, gets out of the way of our lot. Maybe that is why we have not been visited (officially and in the open at least) by any extraterrestrials. They are familiar with our history and the bloodshed that continues to be part of our makeup. Would you want to be pals with a species that brought you – just in recent memory – Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, and that's without referencing the minor mass murderers of the past half-century; and it still goes on, although we have become better at denouncing human evil.

Interestingly, scientists tell us that our friendship with dogs goes back a long time in our history, further into the mists of time than was previously thought. One recent figure I saw placed dogs as part of human communities 100,000 years ago. At the time we were just learning to use stone tools of the simplest type. How did we manage to con wolves into becoming our friends? Who conned who? Maybe we were nicer then but I doubt it.

Mutual self-interest is the untested theory which makes the most sense. They hung around our camp fires, probably because of the smell of food. We threw them some morsels and they continued to hang around. We realised they kept other predators away or at least gave us warning. They realised the pickings were easy around us compared to trying to bring down a raging half-ton bison. They got to live longer and be more comfortable; we got to harness their capacities to guard and later help with hunting. We conned each other.

I write these words after having recently lost our own domestic wolf – a Rottweiler/Heeler cross called Benny. He was 15 years old - about 95 in our years. We found Benny down in Cape Paterson and rescued him from death-row when he was about one year old. He survived Black Saturday in Kinglake after our house burned down and was rescued by some Good Samaritan. He recovered from burns and lived happily for another three years. He was very smart and brave, an excellent guardian with wonderful temperament. Being a cross he also had what vet's call 'hybrid-health'. Apart from arthritis as he got older, he was healthy all his life except at the very end. The last three months were bad; all the tests were clear but he kept refusing food. His system eventually collapsed. It was time to go.

He was so special that his ashes will sit on our mantelpiece in perpetuity instead of nourishing some plant in the ground. He was with us for longer than most marriages last. What a wonderful con.