

## Burdock's Fall

Early spring is porcupine season, the best time for porcupine watching. Over the past several porcupine seasons I have spent hours at a ledge site, High Scenic, and have made the acquaintance of nine porcupines. My entrée into this society was Burdock, an orphaned porcupine that I raised and released a few years ago. He is one of the few of my wildlife charges that I have kept track of. He is always happy to see me, and it's not just because he knows I carry treats; he still likes to sit on my lap to eat them. I last saw him a year ago. I knew that my best chance to see him this year was at High Scenic during porcupine season.

With this possibility in the back of my mind, I set out one evening in March following a set of porcupine tracks that led from my house toward the High Scenic ledges. The tracks were so fresh that I was able to catch up with their maker, the dominant male Big East. When I stopped to arrange things in my pack, he waddled on ahead. I caught up with him again at High Scenic, where I found him facing off with a smaller porcupine. This smaller porcupine squawked in defiance but it was my arrival that persuaded Big East to retreat. The victim of the assault looked a bit peculiar. In the dusk I could see there was something funny about one eye, and his teeth stuck out like a cartoon hillbilly's. Still, he looked like Burdock. If this were Burdock it would mean he had survived a third winter in the wild. If this were Burdock it would mean he had run into trouble and was no longer destined for porcupine greatness. What to hope for? The porcupine waddled toward me, humming a greeting, and climbed into my lap.

Viewed from the left, his eye was sunken and cloudy, his nostril was pushed in a bit, and his upper teeth were too long and stuck out at a funny angle. Viewed from the right, he was handsome and bright-eyed, porcupine perfection. As I sat with Burdock in the gathering dark, I pondered what I should do. Porcupines' eyesight is poor, so I was not very worried about the loss of sight in one eye. The incisors of

a porcupine, however, are a great evolutionary asset. The enamel on the front of the teeth is hardened with iron (thus the orange color), while the dentin on the back of the teeth is softer. By chattering their teeth back and forth against each other, porcupines keep them sharpened like chisels. When the teeth don't line up properly, they continue to grow, resulting in a slow death by starvation.

As I watched Burdock eat, and thought these gloomy thoughts, I noticed that he was sharpening his teeth regularly. Maybe he would be able to maintain them at a length that looked strange, but still allowed him to survive. I would need to bring him in for observation until I knew. I hiked home, retrieved a pet crate, and managed to persuade Burdock to shuffle inside to get a biscuit. It was a snug fit and his quills stuck out the holes, but I managed to carry the unhappy fellow back through the woods to home.

In his large outdoor enclosure Burdock is free from persecution by Big East, safe from predators, protected from the elements, has his favorite foods delivered, and gets fussed with every day. Still, I know that if I leave his door open, he would waddle off without question. He is a porcupine and has porcupine things to do; he must sniff every hemlock tree to find the one that is tastiest, and then climb to its uppermost branches for a feed. He must hike back up to High Scenic and see if HRH an LF are home, and remind them that he is an up-and-coming fellow. He must find a secure rock den for his long naps. Yes, he will have to steer clear of Big East and show his prickly backside to the fisher. He will have to put up with mosquitoes and driving rain. He will enjoy sunning himself on the rocks at High Scenic at sunset, the flavor of spring truffles, and maybe a stroll with his old pal Dangerous Dan. I know that such a life would be hard. I know that life in captivity would be easy. I know which he would choose, given his druthers. I hope he gets them.



Good side



Bad side