

A Picnic with Dangerous Dan

For the past five years, it has been my good fortune to spend time with porcupines. In the winter I can almost always find them, either in their dens or by following their paths to the trees where they are feeding. Because porcupines are calm and curious, I have developed something akin to friendship with several of them, making my winter hikes a bit like Christopher Robin's in the Hundred Acre Wood.

I set out on my first winter survey of den sites on a warm afternoon. Because porcupines will not rouse themselves from their diurnal slumbers for any friend, I had little hope of social interaction. I hoped to verify that the usual winter dens were once again occupied, and maybe to see the tail end of a napper or two. Indeed, the first den site I visited was clearly inhabited. The snow at the entrance was well-packed, and on this 40°F day, the coniferous pungency of porcupine was plain, though I could not see the resident.

From there, I headed to a spacious den under a boulder, the Gentleman's Club. As I climbed over a fallen log, I spotted a porcupine waddling toward me some twenty feet away. We both halted to assess the situation. I said "hello," and she continued toward me, returning the greeting with a porcupine "Hmm-HMMM-hmm-hmm." I recognized the voice and appearance of Dangerous Dan McGrew (I discovered she was female last spring). I sat down and unpacked my notebook, camera, and a few acorns and an apple for Dan. She wandered around sniffing things and humming. She has a funny gravelly hum. Once she satisfied her curiosity, she settled down to eat an acorn.

There are things you notice when you picnic with a porcupine. Here is one: long, strong claws can be almost as dexterous as fingers for holding and manipulating food. You can see why hooks have been used as prosthetic replacement for human hands. Claws are, of course, far superior to fingers for hoisting a hefty body up a tree trunk and for digging truffles from the soil. These claws are just one of the many marvelous adaptations that equip a porcupine so superbly for a porcupine life.

There are also things you think about when you sit in the woods with an animal that lives there; you become very aware that you are a part of something complex, ancient, and wonderful. You think about how that the future is now in our hands. If you are sitting with a porcupine, you might

worry about how they will deal with the loss of hemlock and ash trees, both threatened by insects introduced from Asia, and both very important parts of the diet of porcupines in our region. Although the emerald ash borer has not yet been found in Vermont, its arrival is a fait accompli. It is expected to kill virtually every ash tree in the state. The hemlock woolly adelgid has anchored itself firmly in Vermont, but so far, cold winters have helped to control it. We have already locked in enough climate change to ensure the adelgids will prosper in the future.

Given that on the national level, those with power are hell-bent on cutting all fetters that safeguard our planet, and that we have run out of time to wait for their replacements, I am putting my faith in the rest of humanity. I am heartened by the many people standing up to demand change, and more importantly, doing what it takes to make their own communities better.

Dan waddles over to a nearby hop hornbeam and hoists herself up it. She straddles the crotch of a sturdy branch and then looks down at me before tucking her nose into her chest and going to sleep. I don't know what porcupines think about as they are drifting off to sleep, but what I think about as I wander on into the winter afternoon, is a world five hundred years hence where porcupines still waddle this snowy landscape among a forest with hemlock and ash. It is up to you and me. — Patti Smith

