

Room for Raccoons

I make no claim to a special gift when it comes to communicating with wild animals, but I have spent enough time with animals that I can often read a situation and have a conversation, of sorts, when the need arises. The need arose recently when I found myself climbing a ladder leaned against the trunk of a maple tree. Inside were two orphaned baby raccoons.

Raccoons make a wide variety of noises, from squeaks to shrieks. (Did you know that raccoons purr? They do!) The sound I tried as I climbed the ladder was a short, ascending trill, one of the more pleasant sounds in a raccoon's repertoire. The two desperately hungry and worried cubs immediately responded with hopeful squeaks and began climbing up the inside of the trunk to meet me. They were a bit skeptical when they saw and sniffed the thick-gloved hand I reached into the hollow, but they soon decided that this was likely the best offer they were going to get, and let me pluck them from their shelter, and carry them down the ladder.

Because raccoons are rabies vectors, a special license is needed to care for them. The closest Vermont rabies vector rehabilitator is Sally Beckwith, and she lives west of Rutland. The finders of these cubs, Paul and Jodi, were able to drive them to Sally that day.

Those two little raccoons were not the first that I sent to Sally this year—the first were a trio found beside a road next to an overturned plastic tub. A fourth cub was dead at the scene. These cubs, I learned, had been left at the site where their mother had been released several days earlier, with the hope that she would find them. The mother was, naturally, long gone, trying to find her way back to them.

The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences just published research that quantified the biomass of different groups of living things. According to this research, 36% of mammals (by weight) are humans. Wild mammals (all of the elephants and elk, pandas and possums . . .) make up just 4% of the mammal biomass. The rest? Livestock.

Cattle and pigs make up 60% of the biomass of mammals on planet Earth; 96% of the mammals on the planet right now are either people or are here to feed people. Further, they calculated that the biomass of wild mammals has diminished by 83% since the dawn of civilization. This has been summarized by my favorite bumper sticker: "Plants and animals died to make room for your fat a*#."

We can't do much to change those numbers as individuals, but it seems that we are at least obliged to do what we can to be better neighbors to wildlife. Some of these things require some work and expense (fencing your garden), some patience (waiting for babies to grow up and move away), or some tough love (keeping your cat indoors). Some of these things require less work and expense (mowing less lawn or driving slower). Live-trapping and relocating animals is not humane and should not be done thoughtlessly. If you have raccoons raising families in places where they are not welcome, mothers can be encouraged to move the babies. They know their territory and will have back-up dens picked out. They choose places that are dark and quiet. Bright light, loud talk radio, or certain odors will encourage families to relocate. Give these techniques a few days. If eviction doesn't work, I advocate patience. Child rearing doesn't take long, and the mother and her family will soon be on their way. I am always happy to offer advice. I can even give pointers on conversation. Want to know how to say "come hither" in raccoon? Call BEEC at 257-5785, or e-mail patti@beec.org. —Patti Smith

