

# Porcupine Moon

I know of no tribe who have called the February full moon the Porcupine Moon, but I think that from now on I will. Last week, when the full moon rose, I set out on skis to visit the ancient beaver, Willow. On the way, I would stop to see if the ridgetop porcupine den had an occupant.

All afternoon fat snowflakes had cascaded lazily from the heavens, outlining each branch in white and leaving a soft layer atop the yielding crusted snow on the ground. I call these conditions “ski anywhere snow” since no packed trail is required to glide through the forest. As I headed across the brook and up the wooded hillside, blue shadows and silver moonlight striped the sparkling snow. Trees creaked in the chill wind. I consider such rare nights ample reward for life’s trials and tedium.

The fresh snow muffled my approach to the den on the ridge, a cavity created when a red maple toppled, pulling its roots away from a vertical ledge. A roof of roots, soil and snow sheltered a spacious cave, just right for remodeling by a hobbit or a porcupine. I found it while tracking a porcupine I have known for several years, part of my winter census of local porcupines. Intriguingly, I had seen the tracks of a very small porcupine along with the tracks of the large porcupine on my last stop at the den. When I leaned down and shined my light in, I heard a whiny “Wah! Wah-wa-WAH!” I thought it possible that this complaint was directed at me, but given my previous interactions with porcupines, it seemed more likely that the wee track-maker objected to the movements of the adult porcupine. I left a couple of apples to make up for my intrusion and headed home.

Two nights later, with the full moon, I arrived prepared to sit and wait, hoping the occupants would reveal themselves. I unpacked my fat parka and a thermal sit-upon and placed an apple on the snow. As I looked around for a sitting spot where I would not be intruding, I noticed the muted eye-shine of a porcupine in the main chamber of the den. This porcupine was not going to wait for me to make myself scarce, he was too interested in the smell of the apples. I sat down near the entrance to the den and talked to the little fellow. I have had many conversations with porcupines in what I like to think is their own language. They hum when greeting each other or when maintaining contact with a friend. The hum is very nasal and is modulated to express mood and interest in precisely the way we modulate our own speech. As a foster mother to several porcupettes, I can vouch for this. The same is true for their squawking vocalizations. Like human squawks, they express complaints, from mildly disgruntled to outraged.

I hummed in a way that I hoped conveyed mild interest and goodwill. The little creature poked his nose into the moonlight, looked at me, then clambered out fully. Looking like a bright-eyed, fluffy bowling ball, the little fellow tottered about for several seconds, giving me a chance to admire the



weaponry on his backside. This display considered sufficient to earn my respect, he then tucked into the apple. We sat together in the moonlight and engaged in our separate pleasures for half an hour before the porcupine, sated, slid back down into his cave.

I needed a little porcupine therapy that night. I had just read the New York Times article on the insect apocalypse, one of many articles that have come out in response to research in Germany, research documenting a 75% reduction in flying insects over the past 30 years. A reduction of flying insects might sound good if you think of insects as pests, less good if you think of them as food, as nearly all birds do when they are raising their young. Such a loss is also less good if you think of the myriad services insects provide to keep life on this planet humming. The great unraveling is underway.

There is good news too. We finally have a group of politicians who understand the magnitude and urgency of threats to our planet and are responding accordingly. Children around the world, inspired by Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teen, are walking out of school to protest adult inaction on climate change. Girded by the courageous young heroes of our times, we have a last chance to redeem ourselves.

I coasted off on the ski-anywhere snow through the dazzling night toward the beaver pond. I wish I could say I felt only hope and tranquility but there remained a sense that I moved through beloved remnants of a besieged world. Perhaps these are not times for tranquility—these are times to act—to create a civilization worthy of our beautiful planet. My ideal future will have fluffy porcupines that waddle out of hobbit holes beneath the Porcupine Moon.