

## TROUBLE BREWING

Last month, I wrote about the dazzling white weasel that had been hunting in and around my home, his coat making him conspicuous in a snowless world. This week I spotted him in the house again, at last in summer attire—brown above, white below— still with a black tail tip. As I began to write this column, I thought I caught sight of him dashing across the yard. I thought of the chipmunk and squirrels I had been watching and decided to write outside where I could protect them from the weasel. Though I saw no sign of the weasel out there, a red squirrel perched above me chirring and drumming the branch with her hind feet. A gray squirrel hid behind a trunk, his tail pinwheeling in agitation. Most of the squirrels around here know that I am not a threat. Perhaps they knew a terrible truth; in the satchel I carried slept a baby monster. The fingers of fate have doled out penance for the naturalist who interferes in Nature's ways; I am raising a baby mink.

I have been harboring this wee beast since a cat hauled him from a burrow two weeks ago. The little mink fit in the palm of my hand, and at about two weeks old he was blind, deaf, and unable to hoist himself onto his stubby legs. He could, however, shriek like a squeaky toy in the maw of a terrier. These cries brought the woman who saved him from the cat and have jerked me from sleep more times than I care to count in the ensuing sixteen nights.

While wildlife rehabilitators seldom have a problem acquiring littermates for orphaned squirrels, raccoons, skunks, foxes, or opossums, mink are another matter. I have begun to contemplate my responsibilities as the sole family for Maximus the mink. Not only will the task be time-consuming, but I will also have to try to come to terms with carnivory. As an



adult, Max will be a relentless predator. Mink are marvelously at home in the water, where they prey on fish, crayfish, and amphibians. They are equally at home on land and are proficient climbers. They will dine on any high protein meal they can catch.

Ecological relationships are more complex than we can imagine, but I'm not going far out on a limb when I say that the natural world has been shaped by carnivory. By keeping herbivore populations in check, they have given plants more space to flourish. They have made antelope fleet and blue jays alert. They have made natural communities more complex and more stable. Yes, there can still be cycles of boom and bust, but with carnivores in the picture, the dips are never so low and the peaks are never so high.

I sometimes say, only partly in jest, that if I designed a planet I would not include carnivores. If there were just plants, plant eaters, and decomposers, however, only plants adapted to withstand a heavy burden





of grazing would persist. Herbivore populations would crash when the food supply dwindled. What if I simply eliminated mortality and reproduction and populated the world with just the right numbers of very nice plants and plant eaters? Would I prefer a planet with no new life?

Max has tripled in size since he arrived. Though he is still blind and deaf, he has sprouted spiky little teeth, eats solid food, and has started to intersperse eating and sleeping with play. Soon he will be ready to explore the rich, messy, dangerous, delicious world. I will do my best to give him the space to acquire the skills of an adult mink. I won't need to provide him with live prey, but I will have to try not to interfere when he starts finding it on his own. I have to accept that some rules in the pact of life are written in blood. I don't have to like it, though.

