



The View From Heifer Hill—July 2019

How do you hug a porcupine?

Watching porcupines learn to climb is not like watching squirrels learn to climb. Squirrels are instant acrobats; with their swiveling ankle joints and streamlined shapes, they are made to be arboreal. Porcupines, on the other hand, are so rotund that many people are surprised to learn that they climb at all. In fact, porcupines spend a lot of their time in trees. The youngster I observed this week had all of the typical challenges. How does a fat little porcupine get back on top of a limb once they are hanging beneath it? How does a fat little porcupine turn around on a skinny little branch? The main thing a porcupine has to learn is that the tail leads on the descent. The porcupines' muscular tail has stiff, downward pointing bristles on its underside, and is used as a very effective brake and prop as the porcupine hitches its way down a tree—head first is not a good idea for a porcupine.

My foster parenting of this baby porcupine (the official term is “porcupette.” Yes, really.) began just over a week ago. I received a call from Abby, who reported that a baby porcupine had been seen huddled next to its dead mother beside a dirt road not far from my home. I met Abby and her mother, Sue, at the scene, but the porcupette had vacated her post. I located her behind a nearby tree. She looked forlorn, yet hopeful, as I tried out my best impression of a porcupine greeting. She waddled eagerly toward me but then got close enough for her nearsighted vision to warn her off. We finally used a net to nudge her into a crate and I transported her home.

Most orphaned animals readily accept a surrogate parent. Young birds and mammals are doomed without the protection and food a parent provides. This is a bond that is often forged through touch. If anyone ever needed a hug, it was this poor little porcupine. Porcupines, however, do not

enjoy being touched. For several days the porcupette called forlornly for her mother, while I did my best to demonstrate that I was a competent replacement.

By the end of the first week, she was perfectly willing to believe I was a benefactor, but certainly not her mother. She treated me the way porcupines treat each other; she hummed a greeting and reached out a paw when she wanted company, and she squawked like a pirate's parrot when she didn't. I have a porcupine puppet that has provided comfort and amusement to other porcupettes, and she treated the puppet in much the same way. I know better than to take it personally. Like families that thrive on emotional drama, porcupines tell each other exactly how they're feeling, and offense is seldom taken.



Today, when she started play-wrestling with the puppet, I decided I might safely take her out of her enclosure for a walk and trust her to follow me. Sure enough, when I opened the door, she waddled along closely on my heels, humming eagerly. My attentions had worked! She had decided I would be, if not her mother, her trusted leader. When the path through the ferns opened onto what passes for lawn here, she turned to the left and continued humming on her merry way, solo. I decided to let her have some free play time and hoped I would be able to apprehend her when the time came. I have a fair amount of porcupine wrangling experience, so I felt reasonably optimistic. When she hoisted herself up a maple sapling, I judged it safe and let her go, knowing if she fell it wouldn't be far. I hoped when she came down, she would be ready to find a friend. She figured out the tail-first thing in about an hour and returned to terra firma, but remained resolutely independent. I followed her

up a path and watched as she nibbled experimentally on things she encountered. I leaped in to prevent her from going up tall trees. When she veered off into the woods, my footsteps on the crackling pine twigs startled her into a porcupine gallop. I followed the prickle ball as closely as I could without increasing her panic. After a while, she became accustomed to my following, and I was able to get ahead and begin herding her back toward home.

At last, she stopped, sat up and looked at me. I sat down beside her and pulled out the puppet. The puppet made play overtures and the little porcupine succumbed. Puppet and porcupine wrestled and squealed. The duelers made their way up a leaning log,

and when they reached the end the little porcupine hurled herself into the raised paws of the puppet, a hug of sorts, and I transferred her to a perch on my arm. I managed to carry her back to her enclosure, not without complaint, but without mishap.



I hope to be able to report, sometime later this summer, that the little porcupine has learned to climb well, knows she has friends, and is enjoying expressing her opinions, whatever they may be. I will continue to practice patience and tolerance. I'll let you know how it goes.

