



The View From Heifer Hill—August 2019

The meaning of mink

This morning I am sitting in a magnificent milkweed patch, my temporary office, watching the monarchs laying eggs and listening to the last-of-July birds—a chipping sparrow and a couple of black-billed cuckoos. None of them seem aware of my reason for working outside this morning. They would be raising a ruckus if they knew; Max the mink is out and about, learning about the world. Here he comes now, slinking through the dark tangle of summer, then bounding up the path and sliding under my seat. He chortles all the while, the soft sound of mink conversation.

A cat grabbed this mink from his den when he was two weeks old. I have been doing my best to be a mother mink since he came into my custody. Although Max is the first mink I have raised, much is familiar. Baby mink play is similar to the play of other children. Max loves to hide and spring out to attack. He loves the scary monster game. He loves to be scooped up and swung through the air. No one who has spent time with the young of other mammals can doubt our shared ancestry.

Oh, but Max is his own wonderful, wild beast. Since kids like rides, I thought I might amuse him by encouraging him to climb onto a towel that I would then drag along the ground. Max very quickly upped the ante, latching onto it with his teeth and then rolling onto his back. I would swing the towel in increasingly large arcs and with increasing speed. He appeared relaxed, his little hind feet sticking out behind him. The game has now escalated further: as Max clings to the towel, I lift it into the air a bit and swing him back and forth. Don't try this with your kids. This is what mink are designed to do; they have strong jaws that lock and don't let go. When I lower him to the ground, he spins, giving the towel a "death roll." I always tire of this game before

he does. I can see the value of such play. Max's reflexes and speed increase every day. I'm sure his jaw muscles are prodigious.

Mink are both predator and prey. The first time he walked with me down to the brook, he carefully selected a route that allowed him to slink through thickets. Though I watched carefully, I seldom saw him in the dark tunnels of vegetation. I could hear his chortles, though.

Yesterday was our fifth trip to the brook, and when we neared it, Max raced ahead. He barreled over the side of the skidder bridge and into one of his well-explored holes in the stone abutment. Soon he was swimming laps in a riffle, as fluid as the water itself, sticking his face underwater in search of anything edible.

The brook flows through an old beaver meadow surrounded by the dark spires of spruce and fir trees. Hundreds of acres separate this brook from human disturbance. Sedges drape the bank, creating a curtain beneath which Max slinks. Ebony jewelwing damselflies flit above the water, flashing from emerald green to blue as they catch the light. While there may be more breathtaking places on earth, this human and mink agree that there is no better place to be on a summer afternoon.

Max swam up a little rivulet to explore a familiar pool, and I sat in the shade next to the bridge to record observations. Though very few other humans venture this way, I was not surprised when I heard voices; I saw the surveyors' vehicle parked at the beginning of the trail. The remarkable man who owned much of this land died in the spring, and I have been worried about what this will mean for the large parcels of forestland he cobbled together over the years.

When the men approached the bridge, I greeted them and asked what they were surveying. As I feared, the large property would be divided in half, with this former road as a boundary. Somewhere in my subconscious skulks an ogre of doom. That is not surprising. Somehow I also host a fairy of optimism. The two began arguing as soon as the men headed on. Maybe the future owners of the new parcels would build modest homes near the road and value this wild place for the same reasons that Max and I do. But wait, interrupted the more reasonable voice of doom, people want to live in this town. What if, instead, the parcels are sold to developers who subdivide further and put in access roads? Or what if a buyer sees the forest as an ATV track? I know some of the good people who must have inherited this land, returned the fairy of optimism, they will not want to see it

ruined. "Ruined" means different things to different people. It certainly means something different to a creature that clings to life with his teeth, knows every dark cranny, and is as fluid as the brook itself.

The sedges stirred as Max loped back down to the bridge. He bounded up my arm and draped his cool, damp belly around the back of my neck, the perfect stole for summer. I laughed nervously as he panted in my ear; I knew the next thing would be a nibble, and a little mink just can't help nipping a bit harder than is pleasant. Max frolicked as we headed home, scampering ahead (just a little bit) then rushing back and leaping in the air at my feet. I scooped him up, held him aloft, and told him that he was a very silly mink. He looked pleased to hear it.

