



## Mo Trouble

Here we are, you and I, on this October day in Vermont. That makes us exceedingly fortunate. Nowhere else, I'm told, stages autumn with such flair. As I write this, I am sitting outside with Mo savoring the smells and textures of freshly fallen leaves.

I wrote about this young porcupine earlier in the year; he came into my custody when he was found next to his mother's body on the side of the road. Usually, baby porcupines will bond with a caretaker, and they can be taken out of their enclosure to experience the world. Mo made his attitude plain; I was a kidnapper. He was sometimes civil, sometimes rude, and seldom friendly. When I tried to take him out, he ignored my overtures to stay and play and headed off resolutely for the better life he knew awaited. I decided to release him in the middle of August. He was as big as some yearlings by that time, and I knew he would seek out other porcupines to learn where to find food and shelter.

Several weeks later, I got a message from a neighbor. A little porcupine was under her chicken coop and seemed to have something wrong with one of its legs. No one was home when I arrived, but I wandered around and made porcupine greetings, a nasal "mmm mmMMM MMMMM mmm mmm." Soon I heard a responding hum, and it led me to Mo. Sure enough, he was limping badly. I decided to take him back into

custody to give his leg a chance to heal. I put a pet crate down beside him, and because porcupines are interested in novel objects, he waddled in and became a prisoner once again.

Back in his familiar enclosure, Mo settled right into his old den box. What was new was his attitude. I think he finally realized that this strange biped was the closest thing to a family he was likely to get.

When I went out to feed him and visit with him, he climbed right up onto my lap. He now likes having his belly rubbed, and even seems to enjoy being stroked, which is unusual for a porcupine.

Porcupines have very special paws—leathery palms, short toes, and long claws that they use to hold and manipulate food, scratch themselves (the porcupine's sole nod to grooming), and to hoist themselves up trees. Right now, Mo is using them to grab my hands, fold up my laptop, and generally make himself the center of my attention. I have an email from a friend in Newfoundland sent from a satellite communication device. The message shows the location it was sent from in satellite imagery. It turns out Newfoundland is a vast, rocky, barren boreal place. How vast? Well, to find out, I zoomed out and panned south. It looks to me like Newfoundland would cover a big chunk of New England and neighboring Canada. While I was looking down on the world, I decided to take a tour of the east coast. I looked for the greenest places I could see and zoomed in. Nearly always, what I found was a landscaped

chopped and cropped and densely roaded, with the green coming from agricultural fields, small patches of woods, and forest plantations. The only large, intact natural areas were public lands. Mo roused me from despair by clambering onto my keyboard.

The biologist E.O. Wilson has proposed that we set aside half of the Earth for nature. When I first read about it, I thought 50% was a pretty miserly allowance from one species to the rest of life. Given how little nature remains in the area of my virtual tour, half of the Earth seems more ambitious than stingy. According to the Half-Earth Project, if we can set aside a strategic system of reserves, we can provide sufficient habitat to support 85% of existing species, and thus curtail the worst of the mass extinction that is underway.

I see that there is no way to get any work done hanging out with this porcupine. As I pack up, Mo rears up and hugs my leg, giving me the porcupine version of "please don't go!" I hope that soon, his leg will heal and that he will choose to stay in the neighborhood and stop by for visits. Even more, I hope that we will be able to find it in ourselves to leave room on this planet for porcupines and life in all of its wondrous variety.

