

## News from the Beaver Lodge



Tonight I'm at my club, the Beaver Lodge, with a couple of fellow members, Pumpkin and Curly. They have just climbed out of the pool and are having dinner. The club remains open during COVID-19 since the other members are immune to the virus, as far as we know. I sit in the library (a platform with a bale of straw to recline against), thinking about what I should write for you this month. My mind keeps turning up the hill to the sleek little creature staying at the rehabilitation facility. She will not be admitted to this club. No. We hope that you will not think us small-minded. Curly and Pumpkin are beaver kits. Bertie is a bobcat.

Since I also supervise the rehabilitation facility, I can tell you a bit about this little cat. She was hit by a car in early August, and Dave Taddei, the game warden, drove her down from Springfield. The big kitten sat, dazed, in a milk crate, but when I transferred her to a large pet carrier, she

whirled and bit me on the hand, her kitten teeth sinking with remarkable ease through the gloves I wore. There was not much blood, and I have had my rabies vaccine, so no harm, no foul.

It was clear she had some problems with motor control. Although she could move all of her limbs, she couldn't stay on her feet. I offered her a can of cat food, and while she ate, she allowed me to run my hands along her legs and hips to feel for fractures. I found none. I also found no wounds. Her eyes were strangely unfocused, it's true, but I didn't figure out until the next day that she was functionally blind.

I have a hard time imagining what it would be like to build a three dimensional world using sound, as bats do, or to read the rich scent trails that reach the noses of bears and foxes. Bobcats' primary sense is vision. I can almost imagine slinking silently through the forest on soft paws, ever alert for the slightest motion.

Of course, we don't see the same way. Bobcats don't see the colors we do, but they see much better in the dark because they have six- to eight-times as many rod cells. Rods are sensitive to dim light and motion. Cats are mesmerized by televisions because they have faster "flicker fusion" than we do; they see the images on the screen as a series of jerky stills.

As a vegetarian, I refuse to think about what bobcats do when they see a telltale twitch. My friend Alcott Smith, a retired veterinarian who has spent more time following bobcat tracks than anyone else I know, describes it thus: "By stalking, slinking, sneaking, they position themselves for explosive, catapulting attacks of two to five bounds within a few seconds."

What to do with a blind bobcat?

Over the first week, Bertie gradually developed more motor control. She could rise and turn in her crate without falling. She ate very well and tolerated my care. None of this would help if she couldn't see.

I regularly consulted with Alcott. He suggested putting her into a larger outdoor enclosure to see how she would respond. The recovery came very quickly after that. Soon she was on her feet and moving around with only a limp. Within a few days, it was clear that her eyesight was returning. Now, almost a month into her convalescence, she is just fine. She makes eye contact and snarls softly when I approach. She would likely make

good on the threat if I violated her personal space. Still, I trust she will not act aggressively without provocation. So I move slowly and hum quietly.

Bobkittens typically stay with their mother until the mating season in mid-winter. If I return her to the place where she was hit, will she find the rest of her family? Will they welcome her back? Last weekend Alcott came down to check her. He brought a freshly road-killed weasel. I watched from afar as Bertie pranced around her enclosure with the limp body in her teeth. The wicked little carnivore then behaved like a cat in the nip, leaping in the air and rolling on the ground, tossing the poor weasel around her enclosure. Alcott thinks she's ready to return home. Even if she doesn't reunite with her family, she will have a few good-weather months to become a proficient hunter.

In the time I have been describing Bertie to you, Pumpkin and Curly have returned to the pool where they practiced their version of water polo. Now Pumpkin has strolled into the library, a bit damp, to see what I'm doing. I think I'd better put this away and give the beaver some cuddles, or I will have no peace. I expect I'll be writing my next column from the same location. Where will Bertie be? In my preferred scenario, I see the cautious reunion between mother and kitten. What exhilaration the bobkitten will feel with her life restored! In a month, I see her slinking on silent paws through a thicket at the forest edge, alert for the tiniest twitching. I won't imagine what comes next.

