



The View From Heifer Hill, December 2020

Wild Kingdom

In my youth, I spent many memorable hours on the couch with Marlin Perkins. If you're as old as I am, you'll know I'm reminiscing about adventures with zebras and wildebeest, kangaroos and koalas, not Marlin himself. Like many fans of the TV show Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, I grew up dreaming of a career with exotic wildlife.

Today I live a scant ten miles from the site of that couch, and the wildlife I work with are not very exotic. I am not disappointed in the least. The kinds of things I learn as a wildlife rehabilitator are quite different from those showcased on Wild Kingdom, but I find them more satisfying.

Did Marlin Perkins know that baby chipmunks scamper around with their eyes sealed closed? This makes perfect sense when you remember that they spend their early weeks in underground burrows. I also know that young chipmunks readily take up residence with baby gray squirrels and red squirrels. The more, the merrier.

I have watched young flying squirrels gain confidence as gliders, gathering their nerve for the big leap. I have also learned that they are the softest animals on the planet. Although tiny (southern flying squirrels are about the same size as chipmunks), they will box the noses of gray squirrels and porcupines that blunder too close to their nests.

I have learned that baby porcupines play by spinning in circles and that opossums do not play at all, unless you count playing dead.

Baby mink make chortling sounds to keep in touch with family members as they slink through thick vegetation. Baby beavers talk to each other with squeaks that sound a bit like a chorus of peepers.

I have learned that for all of these animals, a time arrives when they need to assume their rightful place in the world, and once there, they usually know just what to do. On first encountering soil, squirrels roll and leap and tumble in the heavenly stuff, and they take to the trees like seasoned acrobats. Opossums, heads raised and sniffing audibly, follow their noses into the smorgasbord of nature. Young porcupines follow the scent trails of others to find suitable den sites and feeding trees.

I mention these things hoping to find a few of you out there with unfulfilled Wild Kingdom fantasies. Southern Vermont needs more rehabilitators. Of course, there is nothing glamorous about most of the work of caring for injured and orphaned wildlife. It is not for the squeamish. There's no avoiding heartbreak. Did I mention the time involved? Oh, and the patients don't pay the bills. If you are like me, however, the rewards of caring for wildlife are beyond measure. If you have a keen interest and extra time, you will find a link to an introductory presentation on the Wildlife Rehabilitation page on BEEC's website. If you ask me, a squirrel in the hand is worth more than Marlin Perkins on the couch.