



THE VIEW FROM HEIFER HILL— JULY 2021

I AM A WOODCHUCK

A couple of months ago, I referenced a childhood essay in this column in which I announced what I would be when I grew up—a housewife. That was one of two essays preserved from that chapter of my life. The other, I am a Woodchuck, turned out to be more prescient; this spring, I became a foster parent to three little whistle pigs. I think this makes me a mother woodchuck.

I always learn so much when raising the young of a new species. For example, each species has a sound used to keep in touch with family members as they begin to explore the world, a “contact call.” Opossums make an emphatic “chk” that sounds like a sneeze. Porcupines hum. Beavers squeak. Minks chortle. In woodchucks, the contact call is a rolling, low-pitched, three-beat trill. I try to copy it by saying “wugeda-wugeda-wugeda.” Have you heard a Guinea pig purr? It’s something like that. The groundhog gals make this jolly sound continuously as they follow me, little tails curled up and wagging.

Play is another behavior I am privy to as a wildlife rehabilitator. For most species, play hones skills that will aid survival. Woodchucks nip and wrestle

with the best of them. Unlike other rodents I raise (porcupines, squirrels, chipmunks, and beavers), woodchucks also like to play tugging games, biting and pulling on my clothing. I’m not sure what sort of adult behavior this shapes. Ideas?

All young mammals need nurturing contact. Woodchucks are no exception. This little trio demands attention and, unlike squirrels who become too energetic to sit still, even as adolescents, they love to sprawl in a lap for stroking. I don’t worry that this will make them less wild. Their repertoire of adult behaviors is developing nicely and includes being wary of unfamiliar people. I assume that, like most children, they will soon outgrow their need for maternal affection.

I have begun looking for good release sites — large meadows with rock piles or vacant burrows. Woodchucks need access to an abundance of greenery in the summer. Somehow they will fatten enough on this diet of salad to spend six to seven months of the year hibernating. Before they hibernate, they often dig another burrow, their winter home, in the woods.

Many people are not interested in having woodchuck neighbors. Fair enough. Woodchucks love to eat many of the same plants people like to grow. Other animals, however, do like to have woodchucks around. These charming diggers provide shelter for opossums, skunks, weasels, mink, and more. Their burrows are often used as starter homes by foxes. I encourage you to woodchuck-proof your garden so you can enjoy the habitat diversity and ornamental value of backyard whistle pigs.

It's time to head out to the woodchuck enclosure with another pile of greens and their supper bottles. I will be greeted by a concert of wugedas and wagging tails. I think I will conclude this column the same way I ended my second-grade essay, "I am a woodchuck, and I like it."

—Patti Smith

