



The View From Heifer Hill—August 2022

Pop Goes, the Weasel



I spent the evening of August 2 sitting outside in my hammock chair waiting for Pop Goes. That is what wildlife rehabilitators do. We raise the orphaned children of other species, and when they head off on their own, we wait, watch, and hope for a sign that they are doing okay. I imagine this sounds familiar to all parents, but my kids have no idea that I am sitting up worrying, and they have no intention of sending me a message. These waiting games are not as fraught as they were when I raised my first orphans. I accept

them as part of the privileged access I have to the lives of these amazing animals.

Pop Goes was about three weeks old when a cat killed his mother. His eyes had just opened, and he was growing in his first coat —milk chocolate on the top half and white on the lower half. He fit neatly in my hand. I'm guessing you are already picturing the rest—a long slim snake-of-a-body with inconsequential legs.

Pop Goes is a short-tailed weasel, the smaller of the two species that live in our region. While both turn white in the winter, except for the black tips of their tails, they are not as closely related as you might guess. Long-tailed weasels evolved in North America before the Pleistocene, hunting mice and voles in grasslands. Short-tailed weasels evolved later in Eurasia and migrated to North America during recent glaciation. Pop's clan are true creatures of the north and can be found in boreal zones around the northern hemisphere wherever there are small rodents to catch.

As I've watched Pop Goes grow, I have been rereading *"The Natural History of Weasels and Stoats"* by Carol King and Roger Powell. While this book is dense with scientific verbiage, it was written by people who have spent time with household weasels, and they are clearly smitten. The second chapter, "Hair-trigger Mouse Traps with Teeth," describes how weasels have been sculpted over millennia to be extraordinary hunters of small things in small spaces. Weasels' short legs make it possible to move through tunnels, and their long necks allow them to carry their prey without tripping over it. Their flexible spines let them wrap themselves around their victims and reverse direction in confined spaces.





How to describe the essence of a weasel? When Pop is awake, he is hyper-alert and in motion. He alternates between flowing like liquid and ricocheting like a rubber ball. In play mode, he is all hide and pounce and nip and retreat. Oh yes, and joy. Pop Goes is a grinning madman when he plays. In hunting mode, he first raises his head like a periscope, gathering scents, sights, and sounds, then he is off, zig-zagging in a teeter-totter gait seeking a trail. He keeps to the nooks and crannies and explores them all.

Pop Goes is now nearly three months old and drapes off both sides of my hand when I scoop him up, though not by much. If I had to give him a people-age, I would put him at 16 or 17, not quite ready for independence but eager to gain some life experience. I decided on August 2 that he was ready for a nature walk.

When I opened the door to his enclosure, he thrilled with nervous excitement. He dashed out and back a few times, then over to my lap and off, and then he was ready. I took a path to a rock pile in the woods nearby. Because he is so tiny that he is prey as well as predator, he did not take the path. No. He is

wired for invisibility. He was a lightning bolt through the forest of hay-scented ferns, chortling to let me know where he was.

At the rock pile, he zipped into a hole. I waited a full minute before I began imagining he'd been killed by a chipmunk. He really is that small, and what's more, it would serve him right. Eventually, though, he came up from another hole, radiating delight. He was a weasel. I watched for an hour as he scooted in and out of the rock pile. He checked in with me often at first, and then the intervals grew longer. The last time I saw him, he was rocketing down a sun-dappled bank into a thicket.

I waited in my hammock chair for three hours, writing this column and enjoying the sunset. When the sun disappeared, I ended the vigil. By that time, I knew Pop Goes was asleep somewhere. I told myself that he would miss me when he woke up. I suspected that he had explored enough to create a mental map that included the places where he gets fed and can find me.

I was awakened in the middle of that night by the chortle of a wee weasel. Pop Goes found whatever entrance the mice use to get into the house, and he was on the hunt. If he is like my other children, he will stick around for another couple of weeks, and I will see him less as he becomes more competent. Maybe, before he goes, he'll help me find all the mice and mouse holes. He's clearly old enough to help out around the place a little.

