

A Fretful Halloween

This Halloween I had, at last, a trick or treat! He arrived on all fours wearing a rustling coat of spears. I admired his costume and ducked inside to get some treats. Instead of waiting politely on the doorstep, he hustled in at my heels. Here I must admit that this character has arrived in the same costume every night for the past month. In that time I have handed out roughly 120 apples and 450 acorns. These provisions are usually at hand in the mudroom, but on Halloween the acorns were spread to dry beneath my woodstove, and so it transpired that while I waited for the knock of more little ghouls, Fretful the porcupine sat by my fire eating acorns.

I had resolved that I would follow Fretful out into the woods that night, so I packed the things I would need. Fretful ate. I relaxed on the couch with refreshment ... read *War and Peace* ... still my guest ate. Two hours later I persuaded him to follow me back out the door.

Like everyone who has met Fretful, I struggle against the urge to make physical contact. He is so appealing and mild mannered. He is, however, a porcupine. He navigates the world with his senses of smell and touch. His long vibrissae and guard hairs give him spatial information about his immediate surroundings. Anything that touches him unexpectedly provokes a whoosh of raised quills, and because his eyesight is so poor, nearly any touch is unexpected.

He appears to share the urge for contact, for though he could not eat another acorn on Halloween, he wandered back and forth on the doorstep, pausing often to inspect me. And so I wished I could touch his fuzzy little ears, and waited. "Isn't it time to get to your important porcupine activities?" I beseeched. He began to dig at the pocket where I had put half an apple. I managed to extract the apple, and as I unwrapped it, the hefty quill pig climbed onto my lap to eat it. When he finished, he placed a paw on my shoulder and reached up with the other to touch my hat. He then climbed down, and, curiosity and appetite sated, headed for the woods. Within fifteen minutes I lost track of him in the shadows and tangle of a spruce thicket.

Despite giving me the slip on Halloween, Fretful has provided other learning opportunities. On the two nights before Hurricane Sandy was to arrive, Fretful did not. As I worried, I also thought of the changes likely to occur in porcupine behavior this time of year. During the growing



Fretful on a friend's lap

season, porcupines wander large home ranges and sleep in the open. In the winter, their territories shrink to include just a few den sites and feeding trees. Could Fretful have headed out to claim a den site? Was he driven to do so by the impending storm?

On the day Hurricane Sandy raged to our south, I dared not go to work. Instead, I decided to go look for Fretful den sites. Though I could hear wind roaring at high altitude, only a light breeze drifted through the mist-cloaked hillside. I found four porcupine den sites. Each was in tumble of large rocks at the base of a steep ledge. Near each den, piles of scat, fresh and ancient, marked the places where porcupines had rested. Calling softly to Fretful, I peered into every crevice that might shelter a porcupine. In just a few I found the packed soil and scat that marked frequent porcupine use. I regretted that I had failed to bring a flashlight to better explore the deeper recesses, for the freshness of sign suggested that they were occupied. In only one did I spot the phalanx of quills protecting a porcupine backside. I had become very familiar with Fretful's rear end, and knew this one belonged to someone else. So porcupines had begun to den up! And in such a den, certified by generations of porcupines, Fretful could be dry and sheltered from drafts even if the heavens descended with the forecasted wrath.

That night, I left the outside door into the mudroom open, just in case... Sure enough, while enjoying the

storm, the candlelight, and the company of friends, strange thumpings came from the mudroom. There, in the coils of a garden hose, sat a bewildered porcupette. Like most baby porcupines, this one sported a prodigious quantity of long hair that swept up in a way that would make a Goth punk green with envy. Her worried eyes gazed at the looming strangers. We crept away, leaving her with an apple, a few acorns, some candlelight, and the rains of Sandy sweeping down outside the door. Within a minute, she was nibbling the apple. When it dropped noisily to the floor and rolled away, she turned and hustled into the wild wet night.

Did the porcupette find her way to my mudroom following the scent of Fretful, the scent of acorns, or both? If porcupines sense impending foul weather and find appropriate shelter, it must be a sense poorly developed in the young. As weak support in favor of the theory, the night after the storm, Fretful returned.

Though frustrated in my Halloween attempt to follow him into his own world, Fretful has brought much that is porcupine into mine. Eventually I hope to follow him to his den area, and to learn more about the charming stranger who came in from the storm. I imagine a good deal of waiting will be involved. Got any good books to recommend?



The Porcupette