

The View From Heifer Hill

Spontaneous Generation and other dog day occurrences

There had been a string of them, those dog days that suck all of the cool from summer, and I guess it was a dog night that I poured a pail of brook water into the parched depression—my own experiment in spontaneous generation. In my flashlight beam I watched as the disturbed silt settled and air bubbles rose. I had little enough reason to think it would work; the ancients believed that, while some creatures arose from mud, salamanders were born from fire. Still, they appeared in the puddle, sudden and whole and wriggling, as if as surprised as I to find themselves called to life.

It's true, I had reason to hope for this particular magic. Three dog nights before I had seen the gilled spotted salamander larvae concentrated in the tiny remnant of water, all that remained of the small wet pool where their misguided mother had laid her cluster of eggs, just a logging rut, not a proper vernal pool at. Despite such folly, the great damp of June had recently propelled a batch of newly minted wood frogs from the pool's modest depths, and these two-inch salamanders were within a few weeks of following in their pondmates footsteps. Surely, however, the pool would cease to be during the morning hours of the impending dog day.

I am always tempted to intervene in these situations, to give doomed lives a second chance and to avert suffering. This temptation usually wins after a brief argument with the inner ecologist, the one that reminds me that salamanders with foolish parents should perhaps be removed from the gene pool. In this instance, I had to give way to the scientist since it was almost midnight, I had no bucket, and I needed to leave at dawn for a three-day trip.

And so it was after an interval of three dog days and three dog nights that I returned with my pail. The pool had well and truly vanished. Still, once I poured the water onto the earth, there they were, the tiny spotted salamanders, as if generated from the mud itself. I herded them onto my submerged hand, transferred them to another pail of brook water and gave them their second chance.



To discover how other creatures were managing the heat, I decided to spend the next afternoon in the woods dangling my feet in a brook, for the sake of science. When I heard the beavers slapping their tails I set off upstream to investigate.



When I neared their pond, I found a bull moose splashing his way past their new lodge, the lodge that likely sheltered the new beaver kits of the year. The moose's antlers had achieved about two-thirds of their growth and were still in velvet, but his majesty was somewhat diminished by the sounds he was making. How to describe them . . . a series of wheedling grunts? For a moment I thought he was talking to me, but then I heard the splashing of another moose upstream. He continued toward the object of his affection, clambering easily over one of the beavers' new dams along the way. I thought it little wonder the beavers were disgruntled.

I think of moose as winter beasts, masters of deep snow and frigid temperatures. When summer temperatures are above 80°F for extended periods, they lose weight and can go into winter with insufficient fat reserves. I wasn't surprised to find these moose cooling off in the beaver pond. I watched for a quarter of an hour as they splashed in the shallows before disappearing in the thick growth on the far side of the pond. To my surprise, the beaver agitation intensified, and this time it was directed at me. Bunchberry, the colony patriarch, swam past me, paused, and huffed menacingly before diving and slapping the water with his tail. I did not take offense; I knew he was reacting to the satchel I carried, the one I call the "porta-possum." More specifically, he was reacting to its contents, three small fluffy opossum orphans. I thought it remarkable that a beaver living in a remote valley in the Green Mountain foothills should have formed such a strong opinion about a species he had likely never encountered before.

I decided to hike farther upstream hoping to find the moose cooling off at the next pond. To avoid offending the beavers, I chose a route well up on the hillside and out of sight. Bunchberry followed along in the stream below, however, uttering his foulest imprecations. I decided to that was enough science for one dog day and took the possums home.

That night I returned to visit the beavers, as free from *eau de*

opossum as I could manage. When Bunchberry appeared he had a deep gash on his front leg. While predators seldom consider it prudent to prey upon adult beavers, they do target kits. Last year, the mother beaver was wounded by a bobcat in a failed attempt to defend one of her kits. I expect Bunchberry's injuries had also been sustained in an effort to protect his progeny. Did the opossums smell like a familiar predator, or just enough like a potentially dangerous animal that Bunchberry, on high alert, was unwilling to take any chances? I have since learned that Bunchberry's vigilance has not been in entirely in vain, for a kit has begun to appear at my seat by the pond, and squeaks at her older siblings while they munch on the apple slices I bring them.

The dog days waned, as they will, and the logging rut filled with water again. I decided to return the salamanders to their source. It is only early August. The mercury might climb toward triple digits again. I'll know just what to do if it does— first I'll perform a little alchemy and generate salamanders from the dust and then I'll go cool my feet in a brook for the sake of science.