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Pictures - 3 neg.*

THE EVOLUTION OF A PORCUPINE

by

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We were walking down the slope below Murial Jacob's cabin at Hart Mountain, then government predatory hunter for that high, semi-desert region. It was early spring with snow still on the ground and a raw chill in the air that made one's nose sting, a deep cold that brought the stillness of a vacuum. A twig under a boot broke with a brittle sound that startled one. Just then pandemonium broke loose among the scraggly, half naked trees up the hillside behind us. High-pitched shrieks and snarlings cut the air. It sounded as if some one was having his hair pulled out. It was only a pair of peppery porcupines venting their spleen on each other for lack of their favorite food, or that the other might put something over on him. It was just the every day brotherly love between competitors in the same region.

Porky is supposed by most people to be voiceless, and so he is to those who run onto him in the woods where he sits like a dead-pan looking at them with indifferent black eyes and little cordiality. But he does have a squeaky, querulous voice with many modifications to express anger, fear, or pain, and softer little squeaks and grunts for friendly feelings or begging for something. He has a yearning tree-top song in the mating season which is in September and October.

The pet porcupine we had a few years ago was a surprise and a revelation. He was very young when he came to us, a little round ball with soft, harmless quills, head down and quills up, in perfect porcupine fashion. He had a bulbous, velvety nose, two long sharp teeth above and two below like a squirrel. He took his bottle and nipple with gusto, gurgled and grunted with satisfaction. And he accepted us as his family and even chummed with our little terrier - or tried to. But he was a walking pincushion and the dog couldn't find any place to even sniff him without getting stuck.

So it was a one-sided love affair.

The books say the porcupine is a slow, stupid, timid animal, but our pet put that kind of a reputation to shame. He was clean and orderly in his habits, ambled in his pigeon-toed gait all over the house, and slept in his box in the study for almost the year that he lived with us. He was a died-in-the-wool vegetarian. In the day time he roamed about outdoors and weaned himself early from the bottle by visiting the vegetable garden and sampling cabbage and lettuce, and he ate quantities of green grass and clover. He liked to stay out after dark. I have gone out in the moonlight and found him propped on his stubby tail, sitting in front of a cabbage chewing noisily. He moved on to one after another and ate enough out of each to spoil them, much to the annoyance of the man of the house. But he couldn't spank a porcupine, and the main reason wasn't mere discipline.

To understand a porcupine, one should remember the traits that have come down to him through his long line of ancestors. He didn't have the teeth or claws of a cat to fight his enemies. His legs were short and his body heavy, so he didn't have to avoid trouble by running. As the ages passed, he had developed a special kind of armor peculiar to his needs. A simple coat of hair could not have prevented him from being torn to pieces when he crouched under the attack of a larger foe, so Mother Nature gradually stiffened and lengthened his hair into pointed quills. The quill of a porcupine is really a specialized hair growth that he has developed as a means of protection and safety. Underneath his skin are broad muscles that elevate or lower his quills by reflex action from his nerve centers. His tail is heavy and also armed with short, stiff quills. When danger is near, he lowers his head under his stomach, rolls up in a ball, and throws his quills up. Many a dog has got excited and taken a hasty bite, and been sorry afterward.

Porky has a yen for another delectable food besides green fodder. That is leather, especially old greasy leather of saddles and straps, or wood that man has handled which is likely to have a taste of salt. Rangers and packers have little love for him and kill him on sight. Woodsmen kill him

because in winter he lives mostly on the bark of trees and thus does a good deal of damage. But there is one place in this country where Porky is respected, and that is in the far, lonely regions of the North. Here his rights are respected, for frequently his tasty, white meat saves the life of a ranger or lost traveler.

With age, our pet porcupine showed more and more the wild instincts of his race. He began staying out later and later at night, and it wasn't the cabbage that kept him. Often I lay awake and listened for the scratching of his claws on the terrace walk, and ignoring the advice to let the little beast stay out, got up and let him in to curl up in his box. He should come in as long as he came home.

One evening the man of the house stepped out of the study door and was sweeping the steps with a broom. There was a bright moon, and all at once as he swished the broom about, Porky appeared and standing up stiffly, he grabbed a pant's leg, threw up his panoply of spears and began to sway back and forth with a flirting motion, crooning softly. The sweeper fell in step and together they danced to the spell of the moon and the night. That was Porky's farewell to us, as that night he went back to the wild and we never saw him again.

Erithizon Erithizon Epixanthum, the yellow-haired porcupine, is found in most of the western United States from the edge of the Great Plains to the Pacific. In Oregon it covers most of the whole state from desert valleys to the coast, and from the hottest regions to timber line on the mountains. It is less common in the humid coast region than in the dry interior of the state.