1990

Editorial Notes

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This being my last editorial for the ISU Veterinarian, I had big plans for something pithy and provocative, but I don't feel very opinionated today. One of the advantages of being editor is the luxury of putting one's feet on the desk and, if you will, "spouting off". Therefore, instead of opinion, I offer a story. To my way of thinking the human heart is often more receptive to a story than it is to opinion. I call this one "Quill Pig".

Maybe it was because the question was asked too often by zoo visitors that the urge to make a less than edifying response became nearly unbearable. Rather than say, "No sir, a porcupine can't throw its quills," it would have been quite satisfying to just once counter with "Well, it depends on how good a run he gets at it, and if all the weight transfers to his lead foot and if the wind is at his back", and whatever else came to mind. Of course, public relations being what they are, I never did say such a thing. With so much myth attached to porcupines, I suppose it was no surprise that Mr. What's-his-name did what he did when he looked into his garage that morning and saw what he saw. I probably would have grabbed my rifle as well, but I'm glad he called the zoo before pulling any triggers. I think he was wondering at that moment just how the porcupine pulled its own trigger.

There are porcupines and then there are porcupines. The Canadian porcupine is Caspar Milquetoast in a quillcoat. It is the rodent unassuming, content to eat bark, vegetation, grubs, nuts, and pass through life undisturbed; at its worst the bane of an over-exuberant dog and its unluckiest, a meal for a Fischer. Quite in contrast is its cousin, the African Crested porcupine; the loud, swaggering, incessantly inquisitive brawler of the bunch. The African Crested porcupine comes through saloon doors. If Teddy Roosevelt had been familiar with the African variety, he would have taken them up San Juan Hill.

Animal behaviorists have documented the odd fact that during a rather elaborate courtship display, the male Canadian porcupine urinates on the female. They have further hypothesized that this practice is to discourage other males from breeding that female. No doubt it works. In my years at the zoo, I well remember the pungent, distinctive odor of porcupine urine. Indeed, the porcupine's love life has been the butt of countless jokes, not the least of which is the timeless, "How do porcupines breed?" It is almost second nature to reply, "Very carefully." That is probably true as well. Yet to propagate the porcupine in captivity is to nearly reproduce the immaculate conception, for in all my experience, I never saw the Canadian variety breed. Still, several young were produced. Some wild caught specimens came to us pregnant, but others were known to breed in captivity due to the length of their time on display.

When comparing the relative body size of mother and newborn, pregnancy would seem impossible to conceal, and yet pregnant porcupines are difficult to assess. The cubs, or porcupettes, usually one to four in number, are quite precocious. They are a shade of charcoal much darker than the adult gray, and possess quills that harden in a few days. Their eyes are open at birth, and they are soon capable of climbing. In fact, I found the youngsters to be quite without fear, and willing to sit rather docilely in the palm of my hand.

The adults seem to have little, if anything, going for them. They are slow and clumsy, weigh too much (up to 35 pounds), and have poor eyesight (their senses of smell and hearing are much more acute). They are nocturnal, arboreal, and while they do not hibernate, they certainly like to pull up the covers in cold weather. Yet one cannot dispose of the porcupine quite so casually for there is the small matter of the quills. That is the paradox of the Canadian porcupine. Life is often a contact game, and there the porcupine excels.

The quills, those ingeniously modified hairs, are the essence of the porcupine. The Canadian species presents a small, slender quill with hundreds of barbs at the tip. The mechanism is
clear enough; don't touch. That's how a porcupine handles pressure. Contact releases the quill, which is loosely bedded in the skin, the barbs expand on entering, and the quill can begin to work its way into tissue. When threatened, the animal tucks in its head, hunches over, and exposes a bristly back and lashing tail. While gently ushering these creatures to further regions of their pen, I often withdrew a boot tipped in quills. Too many dogs know this very thing.

Mr. What's-his-name did not see a Canadian porcupine when he opened his garage door that morning. What he saw instead was a pair of African Crested porcupines; in many ways an ideal zoo specimen owing to the active value of their exhibit, but also, in many ways, an ongoing frustration as I frequently found them to be metal-eating, maraca-tailed monsters. These attributes manifested themselves on that particular evening when the porcupines finally shook their way through the mesh of the exhibit; a feat accomplished by hooking their large incisors through the metal and tugging. It took quite some time, but the material gave way and yielded an opening. African Cresteds being what they are, a stroll through the zoo grounds was not enough. They managed the perimeter fence and headed up into the adjacent park on an all evening jamboree that took them to Mr. What's-his-name's garage.

The African Crested is a porcupine of different texture, wearing a veritable shirt of spears made prominent by a distinctive black and cream banding of the quills. Some of these quills are unoffensive, long, and flexible, such as those of the erectile nuchal crest that lends a slightly Mohican character to the creature. Others are long, quite stiff and extremely sharp. Unlike the contact-release mechanism of its Canadian kin, the African Crested must literally drive its quill into the flesh of an intruder by backing towards the target with alarming speed. This offensive habit encouraged me to utilize a custom cut piece of three quarter inch plywood while working with the porcupines.

Their charge is preceded by a memorable display, the display to which Mr. What's-his-name opened his garage door. The animal will stamp its back feet, grunt, and snort (the uniquely inflated, pneumatic nasal cavities produce a striking sound). Yet the coup de gras is the loud and startling rattle of its tail quills. This is accomplished by a singular arrange-