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The Mice of Yesteryear— Where Are They?

There have always been mice, and there are mice still. There is at least one, that I can be sure of. We store our winter squash and onions in the unheated cellar guest room. Our kids grew up and vacated their upstairs room which we can heat more easily with our household woodstove. Now our guests stay there.

The old cellar guest room has a big stone fireplace with a heat-o-lator liner. We never make a fire in there any more, since the guests now stay upstairs, but heat-olators have built-in airways for the cool air to go in low and get hot and then come out higher up, into the room. These little stone doorways have been mouse exits and entrances into that room for decades. You can tell by the stains from all the little mouse feet going in and out, on their way to the winter squash. They have never paid any attention to the onions.

I put hardware cloth around the squash crates to keep out the mice, and though this has worked, the mice did not give up altogether. They could still get lucky on the other side of the room down there where we keep the dog kibble. It comes in a big paper bag. We open this and pour the dry food into a mouse-proof barrel. Sometimes we spill a little. Every week or so we go down to refill the dog-kibble canister we keep in the kitchen. Any transfer of kibble can result in a little spillage in the former guest room. We never begrudged the mice a few bits of kibble.

All that has stopped. There has been no sign of mice, even in the fall which is when they usually move in, prompting us to set out our live traps in a relocation project. We take them to a stone wall far away by a historic cemetery where we can also visit our family plot. Some years in fall and winter we have taken more than thirty mice there to join the ancestors. We toss a little birdseed into the wall and wish them luck.

Not this year, though. There has not been a single mouse until two days ago. We had eaten all but the last buttercup squash and I'd left it out of its crate, on top of the open



Yes, deer mice can sing! This one was also eating popcorn.

basket of onions. I was feeling sorry that there really was no need to ward off mice. Yesterday I went down to get it for our last squash supper, and saw that someone had already begun that meal! Some scout was keeping an eye on things, some survivor, some veteran of the system around here. There was a bright orange patch of mouse-nibbling on that last dark green buttercup.

Who are these mice? Why do I wax sentimental about them instead of just counting my blessings that the little buggers are apparently gone?

They are deer mice, the prettiest things you can imagine. Maybe they get their name from their warm tan uppers and pure white belly, like our white-tailed deer. Some call them "white-footed mice," and some say the term "deer mouse" is a general name for several species of the genus *Peromyscus*. In my days of small mammals research in Wyoming, along the upper Green River, the mice I studied were *Peromyscus leucopus*, a separate species from *Peromyscus maniculatus*. Most people just call them all deer mice and don't notice much difference. The main thing I hear people noticing is that suddenly they are not seeing deer mice of any kind.

In this time of heightened fears for life on the planet, we are sensitive to any changes, particularly disappearances. A couple of years ago we saw not one single grey squirrel around here, and neither did our dog. Then

they came back. One winter there were no blue jays at all coming to our feeder or brightening up the landscape with their vivid blues and their calls. We love the jays, and so do the poets, from Dickinson to Cummings. How worrying, how lonely, to have them gone.

And then . . . they came back!

May it be so with the mice. With all we have on our plate, all to juggle, fear, grieve, and work for, let the mice return to reassure us. Also the mosquitoes, the evening grosbeaks, and the bats. Some of these are colorful neighbors, some worthy adversaries. We need them all, I feel, or something's just not right. Maybe something very big.

Thanks to one constant deer mouse in our former cellar guest room, I feel quieter. All cannot be lost if we still have mice

— Bonner McAllester