



MONTEREY NEWS

January 2021
Est. 1970 Vol. LI • Number 1



Porcupine in the Culvert

The writer and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton coined the term “mud album,” and when the winter snows come, we have the snow album. We can get the picture thanks to tracks and say, “Deer! Right here in the yard, sometime recently. And something else, too, very small, maybe a mouse.” We become detectives, we watch the next day for more evidence. Then another light skiff of snow falls and we can see easily who has been by just lately, who comes by often, maybe every night. So we put together the story of our wild neighbors, thanks to the snow album. Without it, we need to look closely for more subtle signs. Some people can tell a fox has been by, just by a smell in the air. It is much like that of a skunk, though fainter and a little different.

There are all sorts of clues, and some are the ones we hear. The wild and varied vocalizations of the Barred Owls, the coyote chorus, woodpeckers drumming in rhythms unique to each species.

A couple of weeks back, before the snow album was laid down, I walked in our upper pasture, parallel to Hupi Road, and heard something. It was a sort of muttered moaning. The dog was with me and showed no interest, but I walked toward the sound and found it to be loudest at the downhill end of a road culvert near our woodyard. This is a long slanting drop inlet culvert and across the road at the uphill end the sound was louder. I wondered if a small dog could have nosed into the concrete drop box where it is open and receives runoff, then fallen inside and been trapped, unable to scale the vertical sides of the deep box.

I was the detective. I tried calling. “Hi, dog! Come on, come on! Doggie ...!” Suddenly the muttering became quite different, sharp, urgent. It was not exactly dog-like, but it surely was a response to my calling, and I thought any wild critter would just have shut up upon hearing me call.

The dog with me still showed no interest in this mystery, from either end of the culvert. So we walked on. There was heavy rain forecast and I got concerned about whoever was in there, unable to get out. The down-

hill opening end of the culvert seemed a bit blocked up with sand and debris.

A couple of hours later the muttering was still going on. I went home and worried out loud. Later Joe went up with a bar and some planks. He propped up the top of the concrete box and stuck a two-by-six down there so a critter could climb out. By this time we knew the animal was a big porcupine. Joe had been able to shine a flashlight down from the uphill end and seen who was there. The rain came and we worried, but later I looked at the plank and saw a few scratches or clawmarks on it. Rescue! Big Porky had climbed out, thanks to us!

A few days later we got the snow album, and here is the real story. Big Porky is in residence in that culvert. At the lower end, every day, there are new tracks going in and out, and these are big tracks. The hind foot of a porcupine is like ours, or like a bear's: plantigrade. It shows the toes, the sole of the foot, and the heel. In a good snow or mud album it shows the claws, too. Our porcupine is out every day, or night, walking the same trails to certain trees, making new paths to others, and returning to this long tunnel for safety and to keep a little warmer under the dirt road. One day before the snow, we came along and meddled. The usual song of the porcupine changed to one of challenge and maybe fear or outrage. At least, that's what this detective now thinks.

My uncle was a scout leader and he liked to tell the story about the two scouts who saw an elderly person at a busy street intersection. They went to help, their good deed for the day. After quite awhile they caught up with the rest of their group and the leader said, “What took you so long?”

“She didn't want to go!” they said.

Easy to make a mistake when you get fixated on that merit badge. Do gooders. I apologize to our Culvert Dweller now when I walk by and am a more humble detective, learning a little more every day thanks to the snow album. — Bonner McAllester

