

# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Of Mice and Us

This is fall, or autumn. All of us plants and animals have our responses, some based upon the shorter day-lengths, some upon many another factor. These may be old habits and models, or sometimes bright new ideas we have picked up recently in today's world. We may even have cause to question responses we have always made, sometimes to other living things that do what they have always done.

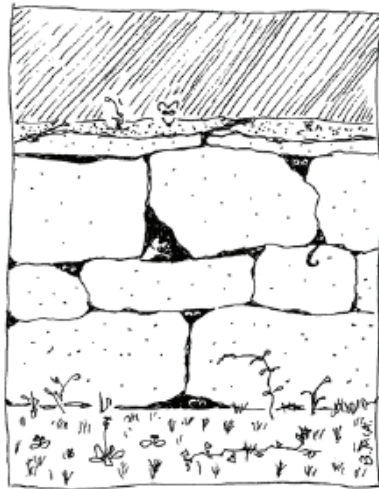
One living thing that rears its teeny head in the fall is the tick. The head does not rear so much as sink into the warm moist meal offered by us and our household familiars. The mouthparts of the tick dive in there, also the head, and ticks do ramp up in the fall. What do we do? This varies with the individual. I am one of two or three humans known to me who does this: I remove the little bugger and then transport it to a place not on my regular beaten path. I'm not likely to meet this particular tick again.

We might meet again during my morning Russell wrasse which features a canine household familiar and myself early in the day, rolling around on the bedroom floor together. I like to bury my face in his fur, and smile. I pat him and massage his loose hide. Sometimes I come upon a tick, which I remove. Then I stand up and head for a handy release spot, hoping neither Russell nor I will run into this critter again, but not caring too much if we do. Essentially, I try to "just act like we never have met," as it says in the song (Bob Dylan, 1964).

For me, this is a familiar dodging of responsibility. We did meet, and I was bigger and got to do with the tick what I chose. As an appreciator of fellow living things, I picked catch and release, rather than death and destruction. If I chose differently, I know the tick wouldn't suffer much since I'd be skillful and humane about the ending of its life. The thing is, I didn't want to be the one. Another song: "I didn't want to have to do it" (John Sebastian of The Lovin' Spoonful, 1965).

That was the 1960s and we were not taking on any more than we had to. We had our hands full growing up, leaving home, dealing with some big questions and traumas on the national and international scales. We didn't also want to have to be the one to say goodbye, or to figure out what to do because of someone we had met. We sang those songs.

Fifty years later it still feels like there are too many balls in the air, including this tick. What I have figured out to do is set it on its own again, like it was before we met, like we never had met.



There is another small wild critter crossing paths with me in the fall, as it has done for many a decade, like fifty years. This is the deer mouse or white-footed mouse. The prettiest little furry housemate: quiet, sparkly-eyed, with a white belly, whiskers, a long sensitive nose, and small white feet. These feet carry it into the house, the cupboards, the kitchen drawers. They sometimes leave footprints, but mainly what the deer mouse leaves is tidy small scatological calling cards. If it weren't for these, and for some shredding of the paper towels and spare rolls of toilet paper, I doubt I'd take action. But the mouse poopies make it so I have to clean up (oh, perish the thought).

So I dig out the trap, buy some new peanut butter, and catch the small neighbors one by one right in the cupboard, every night. I set up in there so the mouse will be spared any investigations by our cat Lucas. Lukey is a hunter, and mice are his specialty. He catches them inside or outside the house, brings them in killed, still warm, and eats them in the kitchen. This never bothers me, for some reason. Maybe because I am splitting hairs and figure that it was Lukey who met the mouse, not me. That is, by the time I met it, I did not have life or death responsibility. Many could debate that years ago I brought a kitten here to live and this has directly resulted in the deaths of quite a number of small innocents.

Where does responsibility begin and where does it end? And what is my problem with killing off the blood-sucking ticks and the poopie-producing mice? I might come to an answer before my own time is up. Meanwhile, I am grappling with evidence. For years I took the mice to a stone wall in the woods and let them go into that rocky fortress. I threw in some birdseed to assuage my responsibility for having deprived them of a familiar home, which was also my home, and in cold weather I stuffed in an old wool sock, thinking it could be fashioned into a warm home for the deported housemates.

The truth is, there never were any scampery mouse tracks around that wall in the winter snow. Were they holed up in there, happy and warm with each other? I knew better. I know better now, too, when I take them to another place in the woods by a big, downed tree, and set them loose under its shelter, along with some kidney beans or something, and more scraps of wool. They will not survive out there. They don't know their way to the next meal. With any luck they'll get caught and eaten soon. Maybe I can imagine this, maybe I'll be fine with it as I am with Lukey crunching away on the kitchen floor.

My best path, now? The response I have known was just around the corner from plain sight? Send the little angels to mouse heaven the simplest way I know how. Some way I can do quickly and well. I know what it will be.

Is there another way besides the trip to mouse heaven? Of course! Just figure out how to make it so no mice ever get into the house in the first place. Stop up every little hole any bigger than a dime. Okay, I will. I'll make it so we never will meet. Lukey will still meet them outside and do what he does. I will get the right material (cement, stainless steel dish scrubbies) and go all around our leaky log house stuffing up the ever-changing chinks. When I do this, I'll have done my best. For now, I can do my second best. I'll ease them out of the end of the trap into a soft cloth bag and break their little necks. This will be second-best love.

— Bonner McAllester  
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