

'Possum Is a Rat for Crashing Party

By Ken Cable

There are in the English language, a few words and phrases that when uttered exclamatorily, engender an immediate reaction in people. Among these are “fire!”, “snake!”, “duck!” (as in crouch quickly), “mad dog!” “spider!” and “rat!” I’m sure there are others.

This was vividly demonstrated at a boat parade party at my home in Canyon Lake one evening during Christmas time years ago.

Each year in mid-December, many human denizens of my community



decorate their boats in festive lights and glide along our lake shoreline in colorful celebration of the season. This is called the “Christmas Boat Parade.”

From my deck overlooking the lake, one can watch the boats go by in relative comfort, while eating, drinking and making the holiday merry. It was at the height of that

parade – and well into making the holiday merry, that a feminine voice shouted, “RAT!” A kind of bedlam broke out on the deck. Soon the night was filled with exclamatory shouts.

“A RAT!”

“Where!”

“There!”

“Duck!”

“There’s a RAT on the railing!”

Soon the crowd was clustered at the east end of the deck, all staring and pointing toward the west end, 45 feet away. When I got to the scene there was one of my wild pet ’possum’s offspring perched on the railing, lit only by the glow from the Christmas lights. He crouched on the rail, pale gray coat looking ghostly in the gloaming, long hairless tail sticking straight out behind him, looking – well – rat-like.

He was obviously startled by the clamor and had lapsed into “sull” mode. A country-raised friend of mine uses that word to describe what a ‘possum does when alarmed. It “sulls,” he says. I had always heard they were “playing ‘possum.” No matter, the creature remained very still.

When calm had been once more restored, the celebration continued, albeit the revelers stayed well away from the west end of the deck. The ‘possum remained where he was, and was still there when everyone retired for the night. The next morning, only the memory remained.

Long years ago, I lived down the road from a dairy that boasted a huge pole barn to shelter a mountain of hay bales. We used to sneak around through a neighboring peach orchard and come to the barn from the rear so as to not be seen by the dairyman.

We’d climb onto the stacked hay bales and build forts and hideouts where we’d keep a sharp eye out for outlaws and rustlers. It was on one of these forays that we discovered the pair of ‘possums lurking among the bales.

“*Rats*,” somebody yelled, but a wiser, more enlightened 10-year-old in the group allowed, knowingly, that they were “possums.”

Well, they simply had to be captured.

It was a grand roundup, complete with poking sticks, gunnysacks, hissing and snapping. Finally, they “sulled” and were quickly bagged and transported to a pen in my back yard where we fed them carrots pulled from the garden.

The ‘possum pen was a 5 x 5 foot coop we used to catch pigeons in a field out behind the cow pens. We’d prop one side up on a stick, tie a rope to the stick and string it over to a fence. Then we’d throw chicken feed under the trap, hide behind a fence and wait for a pigeon. We actually caught a few that way.

Anyhow, we hauled the trap home, put the ‘possums in it, then set about figuring what we were going to do with them.

Up the street a ways from my house lived a man who, by all accounts, was an accomplished small game hunter. We heard stories about chasing ‘coons and foxes, trapping weasels for pets, running rabbits with a dog – all kinds of marvelous wildlife adventures. About two days after we caught the ‘possums, he came into our yard asking to “see them ‘possums” he’d heard about. Said he might buy them to eat them. Well, that took some thinking because we never expected anyone would do that. He said he’d be back the next day and give us fifty cents for both animals.

There is an enduring mystery about the fate of those two captives. The next morning they were gone. Some one of the captors, not at all happy with the notion that they would be eaten, came in the night and turned the prisoners loose. We all suspected each other, but no one ever confessed. We were pretty sure our hunter friend didn’t get them because he showed up the next day with the fifty cents. Anyway, the ‘possums didn’t eat any of the carrots.

The opossum is the only marsupial outside Australia. It is an ancient mammal, evolving in South America. Over the long ages of its existence it wandered into the countryside and backyards of North America over the Panama isthmus, which rose in geologically recent times to link the two continents.

'Possums are either ugly or beautiful, depending upon how you view the natural world. I, for example, think wart hogs display their own magnificence and that wildebeests are asymmetrically attractive. Others – well, others don't.

'Possums are plentiful in Southern California. They have lived everywhere I have, with maybe the exception of my ranch in the Sierras and in Hawaii. They thrive in the company of man, inhabiting their artificial wild lands and hedges.

There are about 77 species of opossum worldwide (none in the Eastern hemisphere). Most common in the U.S. is the Virginia opossum, one of the largest. They are very common in the east and South and are said to be found to a lesser extent in the West. Their "extent" doesn't seem "lesser" to me. I have found them everywhere.

Once, while playing golf on a course in the middle of a suburb of Los Angeles, I saw a dozen crows mobbing something ambling along on the ground. I delayed the game long enough to get close and see the focus of the birds' attention.

It was a female 'possum, with seven or eight babies clinging to her back, shuffling along toward a copse of shrubs. The little ones were symmetrically placed along her back, tails down, noses up, bright eyes wide open. The crows, smart enough not to get too close to momma's 50 teeth, were trying to dislodge the babies by diving at them and squawking loudly. It wasn't long before the squawking from the foursome behind us forced me to move on, so I didn't see the outcome.

On another occasion a friend and I rescued an abandoned baby 'possum found wandering about in the woods behind my office. Only a few inches long, it looked emaciated and feeble. We took it to a lady who served as kind of wildlife rescue resource who tried to save it. She fed it raw eggs and milk, a diet we all later agreed might have been too rich for its physical condition.

Anyway, it only lived 3 or 4 days. I don't know if 'possums keep well in captivity, perhaps they do. And maybe this little guy was too far gone when we 'rescued' it. In any case, I believe my formula for keeping wild pets works best – at least for me.

No cages, no food, no vet bills, and usually no funerals.

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