



In the Wee Hours

On his way out the door for a couple weeks of western hunting, my husband said he would miss his ladies. By the way he caressed my dog, I think he probably meant her... although she burps and farts and really is not all that ladylike. This logger's idea of a vacation involves pursuit of game in various states. This year he is chasing elk in Wyoming, prior to running the legs off his young dog after pheasants in South Dakota. If it weren't for the carload of stuff, he would have taken my dog, too, but there simply was not room. So she was left at home on the farm. As we parted, he told my dog to take care of me.

I don't begrudge my honey his time away. One of his favorite things, nothing puts a bounce in his step quite the way a trip like this will. Early in our days together, I thought I might join him in his western adventures. But I quickly discovered that he is nuts, and I do not enjoy the way in which he hunts. Yes, you might find some birds down in that cattail slough, but who on earth wants to trudge around down in that slop when you can be in the much nicer uplands? And what is with the expectation that you run with your shotgun in order to arrive at the same point of land as your dog is expected to be at, once it emerges from the heavy cover? Running simply is not something I do, unless my life is somehow at stake.

But I'm happy for him. There's just one thing. It has been a long, long summer of fending off the chicken-eaters at our little farm on the Chippewa National Forest, and Honey has been the head trapper. Thus far there have been 5 skunks and a couple of raccoons pulled from the barn. Despite his nearly continual offers to make me his assistant, I have remained safely in the house as Honey deals with things. Did you know that the idea you can shoot a skunk without it spraying is really just a fantasy?

I have kept chickens and other fowl for years, and although we have had an occasional skunk or fox to deal with, we have never had a line-up of critters like we currently do. I have heard from 3 of my neighbors that they are also besieged. I'm not sure what to think about that, except I know that if you have other neighbors that do not dispose of their garbage well, or fish all summer and leave the guts about, you will call in these kinds of animals, creating issues for the rest of us to deal with, thank you very much!

This particular batch of chickens is nearer to my heart than most. Hatched at our place under Goldie Hen, I have watched these chicks grow up, and even named them. There was Smarty Pants, the little grey guy who early on figured out how to escape the pen and do his chicken dance on top of the coop, then wait by the pen door for me to let him back in to return to his friends. Yellow Legs is a really pretty, colorful rooster with a full voice. The Miscellaneous White Boys are 3 white roosters who have recently been moved to their own pen to fatten up on corn. They are destined for the freezer because they have become too amorous towards the few

hens that hatched. The rest of the flock is known as the Salt and Pepper Hens, due to the black flecks on their white feathers.

Without the man around, early mornings have become most interesting. In the dark, I head out with the flashlight and the dog. The flashlight is to keep us clear of the skunks. We look at the stars, and listen to the roosters. Whether hopeful, or just easily fooled, when I flip on the outside light these two pens of roosters commence crowing at each other. I just love crowing.

Next, I soak in the tub for a while before I move on to some exercise and stretching. It just sort of loosens everything up and cuts down on the creaking. My faithful dog lays in the entryway, blocking my escape so that she can't be left alone in the house all day. She has got me pretty well trained. Used to going to work every day with the boys, unless it is really cold out, Sidney has no interest in being left behind. I'm afraid my vehicle has temporarily turned into a dog house, and she goes where I go. I even carry a little stool to make it easier for her to get up into the back seat. Like me, she is slowing down a bit.

So the other morning I was doing the tub thing, and I became aware of a long, low growl coming from my dog. It was really odd, and it just would not stop. At 5 in the morning, I wondered who or what it was that might be out there, so I put my jammies back on, and stepped out to take a look. I did not take a gun with me, as I was not wanting to shoot a skunk. That particular morning I was to be the featured speaker at an 8:30 meeting. I could not come in reeking like skunk. But I figured I could at least insure nothing was in the chicken pens.

I shined the flashlight on the Miscellaneous. The boys were all up and about, but nothing extra in the pen. Next I headed over for a look at the other covered pen. All clear, so I headed on to the fenced chicken yard. That was when I discovered a raccoon in the hay feeder.

After work I was headed to my folks' place for a few days. My chickens could ill afford for me to let this raccoon go free. I thought about heading to the house for my .22, but that would entail locating ammunition, and how long would that take? Then I recalled the Chief Trapper had stashed a loaded .22 in the garage. Although I do not run any more, I think I did on this occasion. When I returned the animal was on the ground, looking for a way out of the chicken yard.

It came as something of a surprise to me, just how hard it is to shoot a moving target in the dark. First of all, you can't see through your scope. Plus, you are holding a light. Tricky business, it's best if you can instantly recall what you have on your place and exactly where it is, so that you know what shots not to take. Too bad I forgot about the man's pickup topper on the other side of the pen, but I seem to have gotten lucky there, because although a few of my shots did not hit the intended target, the topper looks to be okay. It does make me wonder, though, just how many years do you need to keep a topper in the weeds?

As soon as I had hit the target, I took a moment to shine the light around the chicken yard. That's when I saw the second raccoon. Also on the ground and moving, I took a couple of shots at it, knowing there was nothing but a woodshed behind it. He quickly made for a tree, and as I was lining up on him, that's when my light flashed on a couple of white things. Salt and Peppers, roosting in the trees! Darn hens. I got more careful.

I could not believe it when my light found a third raccoon. Now being somewhat more experienced with this whole shooting in the dark thing, I followed that animal as he made his way into the covered pen, figuring he was giving me plenty of time to line up. There were vehicles in that general direction, and I really didn't want to hit one of those. Chickens are important, but perhaps not quite that important. Finally ready, it sure was disappointing when I heard the click of an empty chamber.

Well, the thing to do here clearly was to block off the pen entrance and head to the house for some more ammo. What to use? The only thing was a wooden block along one side of the pen. I looked around for anything else, and even messed with a little wire gate, but figured it wouldn't stand up to the job. I picked my way through the pen in the dark, and reached for the block. By then, who do you suppose was hiding behind that block? Do you know, these creatures are not very friendly when you are up close and personal that way?

I withdrew my hand, and our friend headed up into a top corner of the pen. I couldn't believe my eyes, but he was starting to wriggle out through the small wire mesh. Now I was desperate, and desperate times call for desperate measures. I do not have any military training, but I have been to the movies, so I know that you can use your weapon in more than one way. Hand to hand combat in the wee hours. I got in a couple of good whacks on the tail end of that creature, who by then was really motivated to depart. I'm afraid he got away.

As for the two animals I did in, I couldn't help but be a little enchanted by their hands as I picked them up to dispose of them. Raccoons are known for their intelligence, and their ability to manipulate things with their "hands". Their sense of touch is particularly developed, and their front paws soften when wet. They are known for dabbling underwater with those front feet, looking for food near the shoreline.

Raccoons eat things like insects, worms, fruits, nuts, fish, amphibians, and bird eggs. They put on a lot of weight in the fall, as they prepare for their winter rest. Probably they were attracted to the pen by the corn I am feeding my chickens. If they enter a hen house in the dark, they are likely to kill all the chickens present. They have very good night vision.

Long the subject of intelligence tests, one experiment showed raccoons able to open 11 of 13 complicated locks in less than 10 tries, with the ability to continue doing so after rearranging or turning the locks upside down. Solutions to tasks can be recalled as long as 3 years later. My memory should be so good.

I thought about what good condition these animals were in, and how they would make nice mounts for use at our Visitor Center. Teaching tools for children. By then running late for my meeting, and with no time to wrap them up, I had to just throw them into my freezer the way they were. Somehow I haven't brought myself to opening that freezer back up yet. I'm sad these guys aren't out in the wilds, where they belong.

The logger called the other day to check up on us. I told him to enjoy his trip, and not worry about us. We girls are taking care of things.