



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



Shooting Quills

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My end of New York and Vermont seem very far apart (particularly when my pup is still there) but, talking daily, I know we share more than we don't.

Anne and I see the same birds. Well, she has a tree full of nesting bluebirds. I definitely don't. But I have the heron, a lot of geese and a lovely variety of ducks who will pay a call on their way to wherever their fancy takes them.

We share many of the same mammals. My bear pretty much decimated the heavy wrought iron hook for the bird feeder (no lesser animal could have bent it that way). Others have seen them here. I regret I have not. (If any bears are reading this, please don't take it as an invitation. My welcome mat is not out for bears – but if you could stop by just once – all I want is some good photographs.) Anne has seen bears in the woods when she explores with Mav and Hawkeye. She figures they aren't going bother her. I hope she's right.

There is an animal, however, that we share – and with photographs to prove it. (I won't publish a column without having the pictures to accompany my text.)

I know a porcupine can chew the bark off a tree. Only at the proper porcupine height of course but it's sufficient, I've heard, to kill the tree. That was enough for me till the day I looked up and saw one slowly meandering across my yard. (It requires more license than I'm prepared to allow to call it a lawn – not right there certainly. I do have “lawns” and I enjoy them.)

Anne's encounter with her porcupine took place in the woods of Vermont. Her two dogs also “encountered” and did not fare as well. As I recall she was able to patiently remove most of the barbed quills but needed professional help to finish the job. One lesson learned the hard way for two enterprising dogs.



Peterson groups the porcupine with the muskrat, opossum and beaver on a page titled "Some Odd Mammals."

His map deserves the HUH? I gave it. Porcupines have spread from most of Canada south to the Mexican border but only in the western third of our country. Porcupines otherwise extend just a little south of Canada until reaching New York and Pennsylvania and then spread solidly into New England to the far reaches of eastern Canada.

Peterson calls it a "large, blackish rodent with an overlay of yellow-tipped hairs; size of a small dog; most of body, especially rump and tail, thickly set with long sharp spines. . . A heavy-bodied, short-legged, clumsy animal that may be seen lumbering through the forest or hunched into what appears to be a large black ball high in a tree." Hmm, wonder what one was doing in my yard.

Many are killed by cars when they come for the salt along the highway. I think the dead one I saw was on a back road outside Ellington many, many years ago. We could share the discovery with our youngsters. I moved the quills from one glove compartment to the next but, sadly, they're long gone now.

If you ever have the opportunity, do explore a good (not all are worth exploring) roadkill. It's a fascinating way to see a wild animal up close. (I'll get to my fox one of these times.)



Loners in the summertime, porcupines may congregate for the winter. They eat buds, small twigs and are particularly fond of salt. Perhaps those who put out a salt lick for the deer should take note. You can listen for them, particularly in the rutting season in the fall when groans, grunts, and high-pitched cries can be heard up to a quarter of a mile away. (That doesn't seem very far.)

When the babies are born their quills are about a quarter of an inch long and soft which must be a tremendous relief to the mothers. But those quills harden within minutes.

The Audubon Field Guide lists the Common Porcupine as one of two "Armored Animals," the other being the Nine-banded Armadillo, probably not seen in these parts.

It also has interesting feet. I found a chart of animal tracks. Only the raccoon is similar and its "fingers" are even longer, about four inches per foot. In both animals the "fingers" (all right –TOES – but they look like fingers) bulge closer to the nail. The opossum and muskrat are rather similar but, in both those cases, they lack the nail imprint. Back feet are larger. I've never been able to see sharp imprints in the snow. This might be a perfect time to check mud. (Oh, yes! It's actually rained!)

Anne tells me her dogs have encountered porcupines a few times since. They can tell her they've seen it and that's enough of that.

Both kinds of animals seem quite content to go on their ways unbothered.

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