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Dog Meets Porcupine

Encounters with wildlife can give some indication of a dog's intelligence, though the observing human must understand that a human's idea of what is an intelligent action in a particular situation may differ widely from a dog's idea. A dog's first encounter with a porcupine will probably result in porcupine quills in the dog's nose, because dogs are never content to observe from a safe distance but must smell any new experience up close.

Though this statement may identify me as a human chauvinist, I say an intelligent dog will receive a few quills, lightly embedded and will never again get close enough to a porcupine to receive quills. I define caution as part of intelligence.

Contrary to myth, porcupines cannot throw quills. They can slap with their tails, and some dogs, unaware that this slow-moving animal has a fast-moving tail and ashamed that they were outmaneuvered, claim they were hit by thrown quills. Some dogs volunteer their noses to be pincushions and carry many quills, and some dogs don't learn the first time. Dogs who don't learn the first time that slow moving, apparently non-violent porcupines are dangerous animals may become expensive pets because of visits to the veterinarian.

I thought King Edward, a Norwegian elkhound cross who lived with me most of his life, was a very intelligent dog, and the evidence he brought one afternoon when I had guests for lunch at the cabin near the reservoir in the foothills of the Sierras reinforced my estimation of his intelligence.

Edward walked down from the ridge above the cabin with seven porcupine quills in the soft part of his nose. They were lightly embedded, which indicated that he had investigated cautiously and backed away fast. He had probably brushed his paw across his nose and discovered that was not the way to solve the problem, because it moved the quills and led to more pain. He sought me out, because I made a habit of helping him with problems, but our ideas of what constituted help with the quill problem soon diverged.

Porcupine quills do not come out easily. I yanked the first

quill out with a pair of pliers, and Edward and I were no longer as close friends as we had been. I said, "I really do have your best interests at heart and in mind. The quills must come out or they will cause you continuing problems."

Edward's thinking on the matter was simple and understandable: that hurt, and you will not approach my nose again.

Our four guests, strong young adults, all liked Edward, and they readily agreed to help.

I said, "I think if you four hold him and I operate the pliers, we can keep him from moving and get it done." A strong, healthy Norwegian elkhound cross has adequate body, neck, and head for four pair of hands, which should be enough hands to hold him quite still but isn't. Despite every hand holding firmly, he jerked his head back enough that I couldn't get hold of a quill.

My next bright idea, "Let's blindfold him. If he doesn't see the pliers coming, he can't avoid them."

That isn't how a dog operates. He either smelled the pliers or sensed their difference in temperature, and he jerked back again. I tried to figure out if there was any next step.

Edward growled deeply and seriously, and eight hands put him down gently but quickly, and we removed the blindfold. We all wanted to continue our friendship with the black dog, and he had made it quite clear that now was the time to declare ourselves friends or foes, on his terms.

Several of us rode down the mountain, that sunny afternoon, for a brief visit with the veterinarian, who didn't have the obligation to remain friends with Edward and who utilized years of experience at holding dogs still and a muzzle and pulled the rest of the quills. We drove back up the highway to the cabin, where we continued our social gathering, dog included.

King Edward never again investigated a porcupine.

I think he thought I showed a high level of intelligence for a human, even though I never adequately developed my sense of smell nor my night vision and even though I did breach our unspoken rules for living together when I hurt his already injured nose in a savage manner and formed a pack with fellow temporarily-uncivilized humans and tried to hurt him further.

Warning us sternly, however proved to be effective discipline, so he knew I had the capacity and the willingness to learn from my mistakes.

We lived together for several peaceful years after that, and

he rarely needed to remind me I must observe a few important rules for living together in peace for our mutual advantage.

I am grateful for the learning we achieved and for the companionship we built over many years.