

Skunk duel...

A sudden whiff made me wonder whether it was a car or one of our dogs that met up with a skunk.

After a while it faded. My olfactory blockers must have kicked in to protect my delicate sniffer. What a blessed relief to our human senses, especially for rural humans. Imagine gagging on vaporized skunk juice outside your door for three days, or even three hours. I wonder if it smells as bad to the dogs or the critters of the fields.

A few minutes later the musky fumes came back full strength. Pheww! Over the next hour, we noticed several waves of the odiferous cloud.

"Honey," I said to MyKeeper, "it seems like it must be parading back and forth past our house - in a bad temper, too."

Our neighbor came over. "Pew-wheee! What did you do to make him mad?" He warned us that skunks look for places to winter over as autumn nights get cooler, often finding small hidden nooks and crannies in any basement they can squeeze into.

Well, it was autumn. And evening. We lived in a big two story house. The house had a basement, with lots of nooks and crannies, and a huge woodstack to feed the firebeast furnace that kept our house warm in the below zero temperatures of eastern Washington winters.

We also kept our doors and windows open a lot - an invitation to fresh air, not skunks.

"So, you think he might be IN the house?" I asked. I slammed the door to the basement stairs and leaned on it. I just knew that skunk was two-thirds up the stairwell with his tail raised.

How anyone thought to include even a smidgen of that brutish smelly ingredient in fine perfumes, I'd never be able to guess. It apparently enhances the exquisite sweetness. It takes very few parts per million of skunk juice to fill a room or a neighborhood with that stink. Perfumeries must use only a fraction of a molecule in their fragrances. Might have been where they came up with the idea of splitting atoms. Ya think?

MyKeeper and I stood at the basement door.

I spoke first. "Somebody needs to go down there."

"Is my name 'Somebody' tonight?"

I nodded.

He opened the door an inch and peered into the darkness.

He pulled the string on the stairway light and started down the stairs.

"Wait!" I said. "You can't just go down there. We need to think of a strategy."

We picked out a couple places the skunk might choose to set up winter housekeeping in our basement. We discussed whether MyKeeper should go down the stairs, or sneak in through the back yard door. We determined emergency escape routes in case he met up with the skunk.

Then we started to think about what he'd be faced with if he actually found the skunk.

He needed protection, something to level the playing field. I ran to the bathroom and grabbed a couple things. Just before he pushed open the door, the background music on the radio heightened the drama. The strumming of "Dueling Banjos" trailed behind him as he descended the steep staircase with resolute steps carrying his weapons: a flashlight, a towel to shield him, and a can of hairspray.

How to Catch a Skunk...

Does a skunk have any natural predators? Anything at all? Buzzards? Not exactly. They are just the cleanup crew. Maybe automobiles. Actually, the Great Horned Owl can drop out of the sky and grab a kit before the mother can activate her spray unit.

Those who watch skunk behavior say that any hunter of mammals will eat a skunk if they are hungry enough. There's the key. Like spiders and scorpions, skunks are so distasteful that no animal wants to include them in their food chain. Humans can detect even a whiff of the smelly sulphur thiols a mile away.

Even my dogs don't do well at chasing away skunks. They learned (the hard way) exactly the distance a skunk can pump its lethal juice. After that disgusting experience they would still rush a skunk, but keep a precise distance, plus one inch. This keeps the skunk in place for a long time, tail lifted and at the ready, but does nothing to rid us of the skunk.

My neighbor says it is easy to catch a skunk. All you need is some skunk junk food (say, a frog or a bee or some berries) and a cage. Next you locate the skunk's address. Online you can find ANYONE, but not a skunk. Look for a hump, a rounded dome. While you're looking for a little skunk-sized hump, don't be surprised to find one bigger than you imagined. And that is only the back door, the escape hatch. Punkin said the one she

found was so big a horse could hide in there. Not comfortably, but...in a pinch.

Continuing, set the cage near the skunk dome. Bait the trap and set the trigger.

Then wait...

Then what? So you catch a skunk and he's madder than hornets. The trapper can't even get close enough to carry it away or shoot it.

"No-no-no," said my neighbor. "The cage should be big enough to enter and small enough to prevent a tail raising."

"So there are custom-fitted skunk traps?"

He ignored that and kept to his story. "Then you take the blanket..."

"What? You catch a skunk with a blanket?"

In all seriousness, my neighbor explained it this way: "You approach slowly, very slowly, the blanket held up in front of you, only your feet and fingertips exposed..."

I don't know. Seems like a sure-fire way to get sprayed. I think I'd watch, first, from a distance. I could donate an old blanket, though. I don't even want it back.

Looking up...

I need to study more about birds. Watching them flood back in spring makes me want to know who they are, where they winter, and how far north they go once they pass over our heads. I don't know what most of them are called, and I feel a certain lack for not knowing.

Spring migrations start with the Canada geese in Washington State. I researched a little about them. Their proper name is Canada, not Canadian Geese, which we all grew up hearing. They are as much a promise of approaching spring as a crocus peeping out of snow.

The Canadas arrive one bleak and chilly day, honking their arrival. I know this doesn't thrill a lot of folks.

Increasing populations are taking over cities and suburbs, and they say Seattle wants to ship theirs east of the Cascades.

Pests or not, there's something noble about them that keeps me from grouping them with starlings or

wasps or mice. It's inspiring to think they would deign to come forth into our barren landscape and chase winter away for us.

While we watch, the geese land near the Okanogan River, foraging on our meager back acres even before the grasses start growing. Sometimes it's one pair, sometimes 20 or 50 or 90. They spend all morning feeding.

The geese get lots of exercise when the dogs scare them up. I never know who's in command. The dogs start out ahead by routing the birds from their pleasant feeding. Then the geese wear the dogs to a frazzle, hazing them clear across the field only inches above their heads.

I count it privilege to witness goose parents taking their young on maiden flights. After small take-off trials, with a couple of touch-and-go landings, they fly in widening circles, finally disappearing for hours into the blue beyond.

We stop what we're doing and watch from the first curtain call to the last encore when the honkers lift off and fly overhead. Their flight is just as captivating whether it's a pair brushing the treetops or the shimmering thread of dozens in "V" formation high above.

When they fly low their honking fills the air. Wings wide, their flapping echoes a hundredfold, while their hydraulics squeak a measured pace.

All this beauty does, occasionally, have its hazards.

While moving irrigation pipes out a little further in the field one blistering summer day, MyKeeper and I stopped to watch two geese rise in tandem off the River. I craned my neck, watching them fly directly overhead so close I could have seen their eyelashes if they had any.

It was like sitting in the front row of the ballet, where you can see muscles ripple, hear the dancers breathing hard, and hear the slap of feet on the floor.

It was like that, watching the geese in command performance over our heads, until I saw a wormy squiggle spiraling down toward me, kind of like a cigar. I barely had time to shriek and jump aside. It landed - SPLAT - on my jeans. Whew! It was nearly my forehead!

I wondered if the majestic anserine was capable of such tricks on purpose. I was thinking that perhaps Canada geese did fit into the general category with starlings as I plodded under the hot sun back across the field and up to the house to change my clothes.

Meet me at the cayenne...

"Not now, Honey, I'm pickling the towels," I hollered back down the hall. Somewhere I had heard that vinegar in the rinse water reduces lint. Our dryer produces at least four pounds of lint each and every wash load. It had to be worth a try.

Calibrating the optimum amount of vinegar per load has been a gradual process. The measure for the last load was a quart and a half. And that was a polyester load. Terry cloth is the acid test. If it doesn't work, I might as well dismiss this wash day hint as myth.

Handy hints and home remedies fascinate me. I read *The Mammoth Hunters* and *Clan of the Cave Bears*, following Ayla all around her ice age world as she learned how to use the tools of nature. Author Jean Auel's research was so painstaking I could have sworn she was present at the dawn of mankind, watching.

I found another book at the local library, about the favorite home remedies of Texans. I came away

with the conviction that early Texans had to have steel-lined stomachs to have survived some of the folk remedy practices of those days.

It did turn out that bath soap breaks down detergent suds and adhesive tape pulls out slivers better than my fingernails. Flour and coffee grounds are said to stop bleeding. In fact, a Native American of my acquaintance once packed the chest of a wounded horse with flour at a rodeo until the veterinarian could get there.

Some say to use superglue on mosquito bites, or a very smelly bear grease to keep the mosquitoes from biting in the first place.

Pinching the web between thumb and first finger as hard as you can is said to alleviate headache. Actually, I remember this worked once when I was just too tired to get up for any "take two pills" remedy.

Hairspray is the ultimate stain remover, and peppermint oil can be sprayed or rubbed on surfaces to keep flies away.

Open the refrigerator door and mash food on your face to tighten, tone, draw out, cool or calm the skin. Make a mask of apricots, strawberries, grapes, oranges, avocados, cucumbers or egg white. Then make fruit compote and pound cake with the leftovers.

One summer day I heard that ants don't like cayenne pepper. I ran to the cupboard and sprinkled it all over the kitchen; every inlet and ant trail I could find.

They loved it. They are "fire" ants, after all. They called their whole ant town to come and celebrate. They walked through it, jumped in it, rollicked and played all afternoon. Toward evening they were doing the "bunny hop" and then formed a "Conga Line." I put on my Latin dance music CD.

I could just imagine the first ants out of the nest each morning, and all their fellow ants asking, "Where to today?"

"Oh, meet me at the cayenne pepper," would be the reply. "We'll have a feast - cha-cha-cha - it's Festival! Olé!"

Then, the best news! I read somewhere that ants won't cross a chalk line. I tried it on my kitchen counter, and at the kitchen door. It worked so well, I bought six boxes of chalk sticks and drew lines around the whole house. I stood behind the inner line with hands on hips and an "I dare you" look on my face.

I can't decide if the chalk is confounding the ants, but I do see a lot of mashed ants outside. The girls keep hopscotching the gridwork and calling me out to re-chalk the lines.

Mouse Comedy

Mouse traps
set all around
The pests!
The vermin! - Out!
Till the rattling
traced down by sound
and there, in the trap,
Gus-Gus himself
fat and cute
needing only his
striped T-shirt
stretched over
his girth
by Cinderella,
poor thing, dangling
by one finger
swinging from the ceiling
whimpering
We freed him

*Music of the
wind*

Wind teaches me its song
wherever I go, but West Texas
Wind is the eminent professor.

Bag weather...

I stuck my head out the door, squinting to get a clearer look at the white thing fluttering in the distance. A white dog maybe? Or a lamb grazing between the trees? After a few minutes I realized it hadn't moved. Maybe it's a trick of the sun shining all dapply on the bark. A gust of wind grabbed my hair and whipped it back and forth. Before I could pat it down another blast barreled through and fluffed it straight up.

By then I recognized the white thing. It is bag weather today, and that is a plastic bag hung up on a low branch of the tree. Flailing mightily, it worked to free itself from the twigs, but the tree had a stranglehold and would not let go.

Right on the heels of snow melt came this West Texas wind. In a creative fury, the wind decorated the winter countryside not yet dressed up by spring flowers and greens.

She huffed and puffed, grabbing bags, papers and tissues. Careless in her path, she whipped up the

dust in a Dervish frenzy, blowing sand across the road.

Paper scraps were tossed up like a handful of glitter against the blue sky. Bags filled with air swooped, emptied in a dive, and just in time were buoyed again by an updraft. They were caught in the claws and teeth of the wind, subjected to the ragged gyrations of a kite, but tied to no string.

Whistling to herself all the while, the wind flung handfuls of pretty baubles everywhere. Rearranged according to whim, some were ripped from trees to adorn a stretch of briars.

Shaping the feather-weight materials at hand, she draped the dreary land with scarves and sashes and lace. She slapped a ribboned strip of plastic onto a shrub for a swishy fringe. Trees and fencelines were fancied with the tatters of colorful bags that became beads and chains, jewels of blue and white and yellow.

Finished, the wind stood back a bit, looked it over and, pleased with her artistry, smiled. The scene was a beauty wrought of wildness.

The wind loves a good bag day. She left sometime in the night, taking her fashion show on to another unsuspecting cold lifeless landscape.

Silver Breeze

Watching that woman
wearing grey
around her temples

Looking back at an empty nest
throwing off shackles and
charging down a new road

Cheers to the woman
roaring past gray
and on beyond purple

Cold chicken...

The little red hen kept to her nest, even as the weather turned suddenly cold. The north wind prowled the land with its lips pursed, howling and hissing, searching out gaps and crevices to whistle through.

The hen sat stoic, refusing to leave her eggs unattended. I carried pails of hot water from the house to break up the frozen water in the trough. All the other hens came running and dipped their beaks into the warm water, tilting their heads up to let the water trickle down their throats. But the little hen wouldn't budge from her nest for any temptation - not her favorite grain or even a sip of warm water.

The kids and I had noticed the Banty coming on broody. For more than a week we had left her eggs in the nest while we gathered the others.

A Banty is the most wonderful little mother. Most of the other breeds and crossbreeds are refined for production. The broodiness is bred out

of them so they'll keep laying. But a Banty hen can barely be prodded off her nest when she decides it's time to set a clutch of eggs. She'll take only tidbits of sustenance, then scuttle back to the nest. Whether she herself is cold or not, the damp body heat beneath her is the exact environment needed for the viability of her eggs.

The shrieking north wind sent a chill down my spine. Blustery blasts pierced the gaps of the Banty's corner nest, ruffling her feathers. The only cackle was the wind laughing at her misery.

In great sympathy, I went round back of the chicken house and patched the holes for her. Spreading flat a large cardboard box for insulation, I quietly tacked it to the back wall and around the corner. It was sufficient to cut off the brutal attack. The wind huffed its disgust and went off to play nasty somewhere else.

My efforts pleased me, and I left the little hen to happily set her eggs till a warmer day when baby chicks would be mature enough to peck their way into the sunlight.

Next morning, though, I found she had abandoned that nest. Several feet along the back wall was a new dent in the hay. She had scratched out another nest, more to her liking, and in it was one fresh egg. Nothing could entice her to return to the abandoned clutch of eggs.

Blowing meanly across the new nest was a cold shaft of wind. It's tone changed when I came around the corner. I just know it was scolding me.

Many lessons like this have taught me how much learning and serving are cloaked in the words "have dominion." What do I know? I was just trying to help. And what would a creature of absolutely no brain have to teach me?

I didn't know that little Banty hen and the North Wind were in cahoots together. Tough as it may have been for her, she knew a cold draft of moving air is better for her maternity room than a warm but stagnant corner nest.