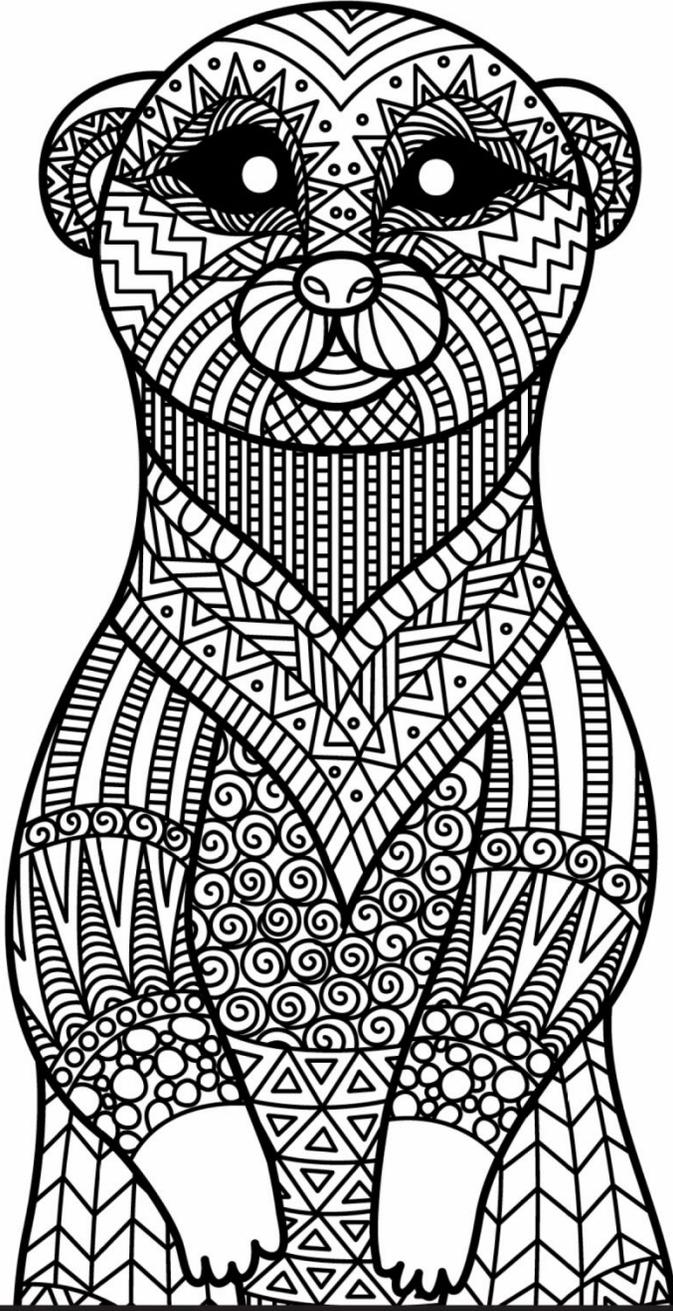


color me!



FUN FACTS: Meerkats rotate roles within their group, or “mob.” The hunter forages for food, its crescent-shaped ears keeping out sand and dirt while it digs; the babysitter cleans the den and protects the pups; and the sentry stands on high ground on the lookout for predators. Roots, tubers and fruits keep meerkats hydrated in areas where water is scarce. While they sunbathe, a thin patch of dark skin on their underbellies regulates their body temperature.

all creatures

JAN/FEB 2021

The Animals Who Share Our Lives

An Army Veteran Finds His New Mission

PAGE 24





Editor's Note

JANUARY MARKS the beginning of a new year, for those of us who use the Gregorian calendar, anyway. It's a time to kick off change, an invitation to wipe the slate clean and set new goals. For me, it's always felt like an open door to opportunity and possibility. Unlike the hibernating creatures (page 46) that settle in stillness and slumber during these winter months, I'm usually motivated to move my body, take on a project I've long put off, make

space in my closet or try something new.

This January, however, I feel differently. We couldn't have predicted a year like 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic cast a shadow of uncertainty and anxiety, risks and protocols. But it also offered perspective. I spent months in lockdown at home with my husband, two kids and dog, Charlie. We didn't have a schedule—packed with things to do and places to be—to stick to anymore. We played games, drew pictures, baked and chased one another (a beagle's favorite activity). We got more sleep, which all of us needed. We found stillness. I guess you could say we hibernated—we took a break from the demands of the life we were accustomed to living. And, as it turned out, that was okay.

As summer wound down, we made the move from an apartment in New York City to a house in the suburbs and resumed 2020's quieter lifestyle in new surroundings. We waved to neighbors from our lawn and watched squirrels, chipmunks and rabbits run around our backyard. Charlie amassed quite a stick collection. Fall swept in, and I delighted in small things like putting pumpkins on the front steps and opening the windows to let the cooler air in.

Now that we've officially left 2020 behind, I don't feel the need to set new goals. The opportunity and possibility lie in the change we were forced to adopt last year. I hope to continue living in that stillness, not only for our physical health but also our mental, emotional and spiritual wellness. Perhaps 2021 will be the year in which just being is enough. I wish you all a healthy, hopeful New Year. I'll be here in the suburbs, watching the squirrels and chasing Charlie.

—Megan Troise, Managing Editor



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For some animals, hibernation is a matter of survival. Find out which ones slumber and how they do it.

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allcreatures

A GUIDEPOSTS PUBLICATION

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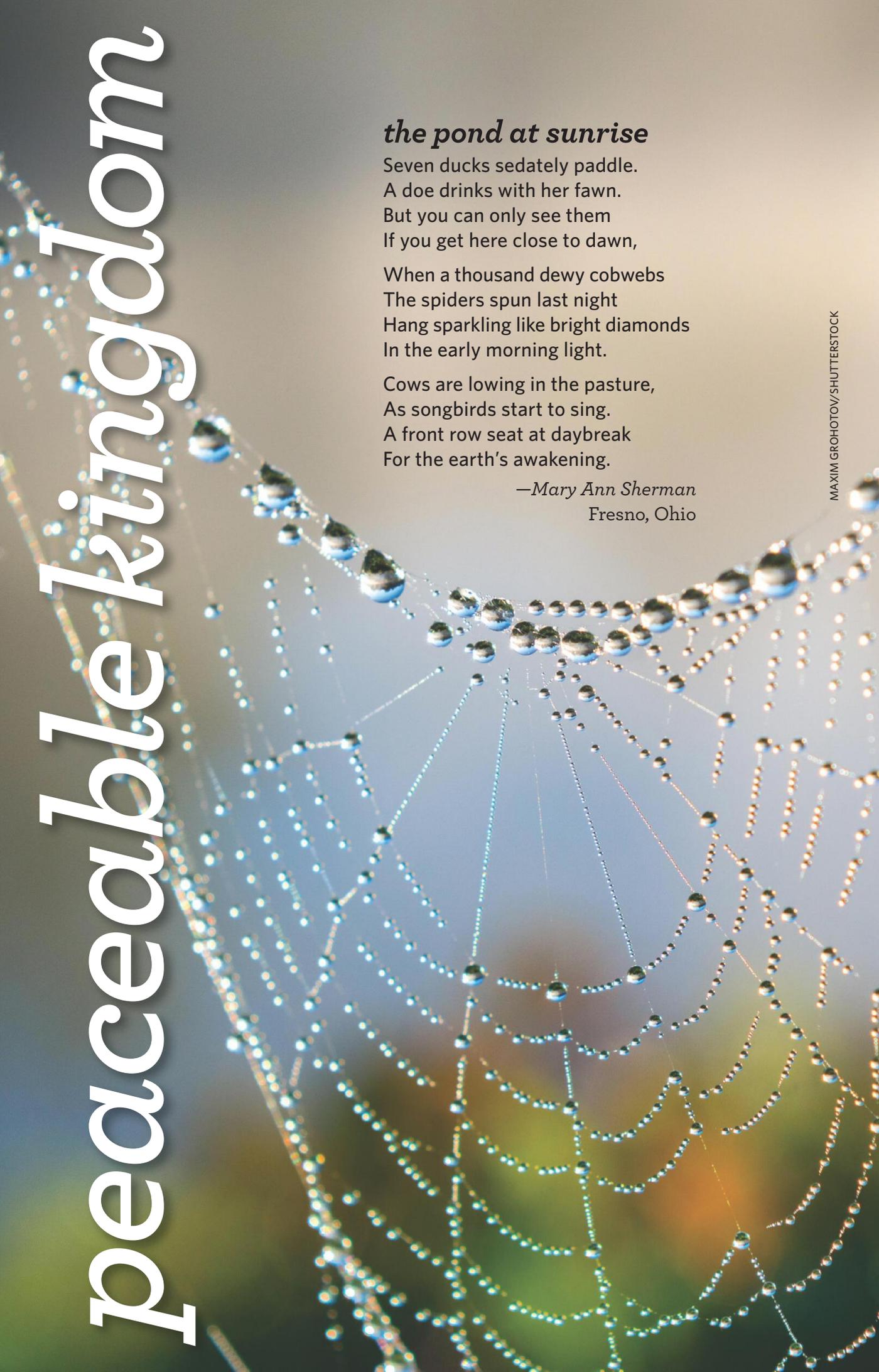
Do you have a story about a pet or other animal that inspired you or changed your life? Send a manuscript to allcreatures@guideposts.org. Connect with us at facebook.com/allcreaturesmagazine.

unexpected friends Maggie and Quincy



Some friendships are instantaneous. Others take a little time, tenderness and, in the case of Maggie the sheep and Quincy the duck, forgiveness. A fox invaded the pen the two share with other animals at Summit Equestrian Center in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Spooked, Maggie scrambled away and inadvertently pinned Quincy under her hooves. The duck sustained mild injuries, so executive director Allison Wheaton took her home to recover. Quincy soon returned, fully healed. She wasn't afraid of Maggie at all. In fact, they became close friends. "They sit together the entire day," Allison says. "I think they really understand each other's energy." —*Jen MacNeil Danenberg*, Contributing Editor

peaceable kingdom



the pond at sunrise

Seven ducks sedately paddle.
A doe drinks with her fawn.
But you can only see them
If you get here close to dawn,

When a thousand dewy cobwebs
The spiders spun last night
Hang sparkling like bright diamonds
In the early morning light.

Cows are lowing in the pasture,
As songbirds start to sing.
A front row seat at daybreak
For the earth's awakening.

—*Mary Ann Sherman*
Fresno, Ohio



Share a moment of connection you've had with one of God's creatures (poems and prayers welcome). Send it to allcreatures@guideposts.org.

Wow prints

News, expert advice, fun facts and more



Snakes have a strong sense of smell and use their forked tongues to pick up scents from two different directions.

Did You Know?

Wildlife facts that will wow you

By Amanda Ericson

Editorial Intern



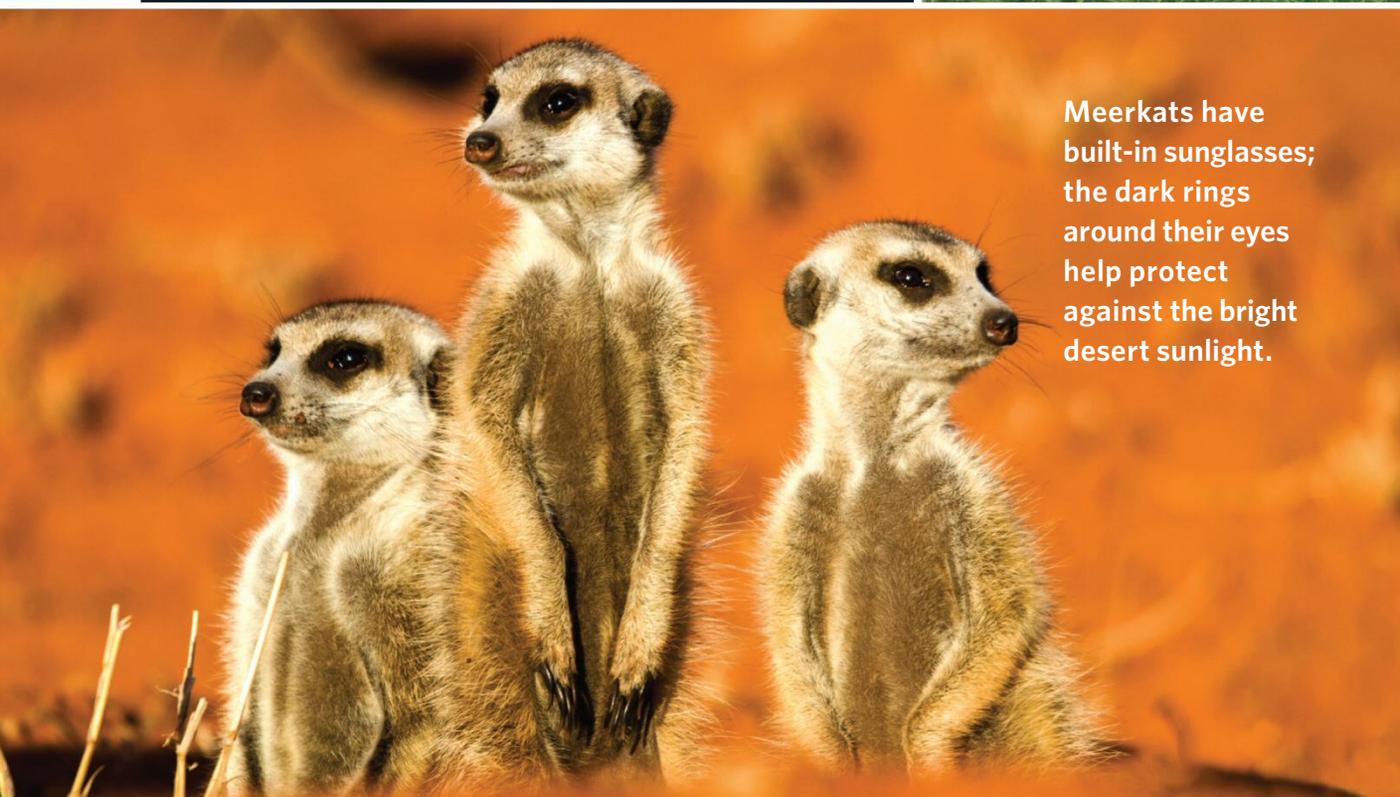
An ostrich's eye is about the size of a billiard ball—which is bigger than its brain.



Hippopotamuses make their own sunscreen. They “sweat” a red and orange pigment that acts as a natural protection from UV rays.

paw prints

Each of the more than 2,000 different firefly species makes its own unique pattern of light flashes.



Meerkats have built-in sunglasses; the dark rings around their eyes help protect against the bright desert sunlight.



Despite their reputation as being slow, sloths are strong swimmers, moving about three times faster in the water than they do on land.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: ALI MAJDFAR/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES; SUZI ESZTERHAS/MINDEN PICTURES; VICKI JAURON, BABYLON AND BEYOND PHOTOGRAPHY/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES; SHONGOLOLO90/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES



Chickens are one of the closest living relatives of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*.

going beyond

MARYANN GOGNIAT EIDEMILLER of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, didn't consider herself an artist. She had never studied art and only dabbled in graphite drawing and clay sculpture before her career as a journalist took off. Maryann hadn't drawn anything in decades. Then, in the summer of 2017, she bought a portrait of her Pomeranian, Josie, through an animal rescue's fundraiser.

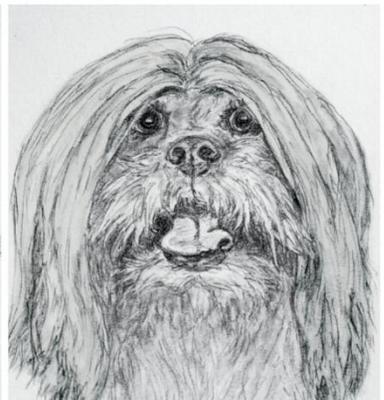
"You could have drawn that yourself," her family told her. They had been trying to get her back into drawing, giving her art supplies and reminding her of her talent. But it was the portrait that really inspired her to pick up a graphite pencil again. "I thought I'd start by drawing people's pets to raise money for rescues and shelters," Maryann says. "We've always had a house full of special needs cats and dogs, so I know how much nonprofits need financial

support to care for these animals."

Maryann experimented with graphite portraits of several dogs belonging to a friend who co-founded Dutch Country Animal Rescue and offered one to the organization's next online auction. It sold instantly, and people asked for more drawings. "I was shocked," Maryann says. "I never expected that to start what it did."

In the last three years, her pet portraits have raised thousands of dollars for animal rescues all over the country through online auctions, raffles and individual interest. Folks send requests to maryannwriter@gmail.com and pay for the drawings by donating to a rescue of their choice. "By the time I sign a drawing, I know that God's hand has guided mine," Maryann says. "It's a gift that enables me to help animals in my own way."

—Megan Troise, Managing Editor



COURTESY MARYANN GOGNIAT EIDEMILLER



Birds galore flock to Barbara and Ron's ingeniously fashioned feeding contraption.

why we love... *this bird-feeding station*

RETIRED POLICE chief Barbara Higgins now has the time for a hobby she's always loved: watching birds. But she is not just hoping to catch a glimpse as they fly by; she's also inviting them to visit with a unique feeding station outside her Springfield, Vermont, home. Barbara's husband, Ron, fashioned the contraption, which resembles an umbrella clothesline, out of six spokes and a metal pole. The couple have hung close to a dozen different

feeders and baskets from the spokes. The most ingenious part? Ron hooked up the pole to an old television rotary antenna so Barbara can turn the station using a motorized control box and fill the feeders through the kitchen window. "I don't even have to go outside to do this daily chore!" she says.

Barbara also photographs her backyard visitors. "I use my photos to make greeting cards. I think it adds a more personal touch,

and my friends and family enjoy receiving them." Regulars at the feeding station include chickadees, cardinals, nuthatches, blue jays, sparrows, goldfinches and hummingbirds. Barbara has observed how good the birds are at parenting and surviving. She feeds them year-round and also has two heated birdbaths. Friends see her unique feeding station and say, "Only in Vermont!"

—Peggy Frezon
Contributing Editor

should I be worried?

My betta fish's fins don't really expand or fan out a lot. What's wrong?

—Katie T., Boston, Massachusetts

A Bettas usually love to fan out and show off their colorful fins. If yours is exhibiting clamped fins—holding them close to his body—something could be wrong. Fish can get sick. You may not notice a big change in his appetite or behavior, since most fish are good at masking illness, but the lack

of fin movement can be a sign your fish is not feeling well. Most of the time, pet fish are sick due to chronic stress from poor water quality or improper temperature. To provide your fish with a healthy environment, make sure your betta is in a proper tank with a low-flow filter and a heater. Filters provide biological filtration, taking the fish's primary ammonia waste and converting it to safer nitrate. Bettas are tropical fish and require water heated to a temperature of 78 to

82 degrees Fahrenheit. Just like other pets and humans, fish need vitamin C supplementation from their diets. Because it is a water-soluble vitamin, C is the first lost from old food. Store your fish's food properly and replace it every six months.

Though less likely, two other possible causes of clamped fins are ich (white spot disease) or velvet (gold dust disease). Ich is an external parasite, resembling grains of sand, that attaches to your fish's body. A



Featured expert: Jessie Sanders, DVM, CertAqV

simple salt treatment often works well. Velvet is also a parasite, usually from contaminated tanks, and gives your fish a rustlike appearance. Shutting off the tank lights and raising the water temperature can help.

Are there multiple obstructions in your tank? Imagine trying to swim in a ballgown. That's about how much control your betta has over his body movement and positioning. If your tank has lots of décor, including live plants, your betta may be hes-

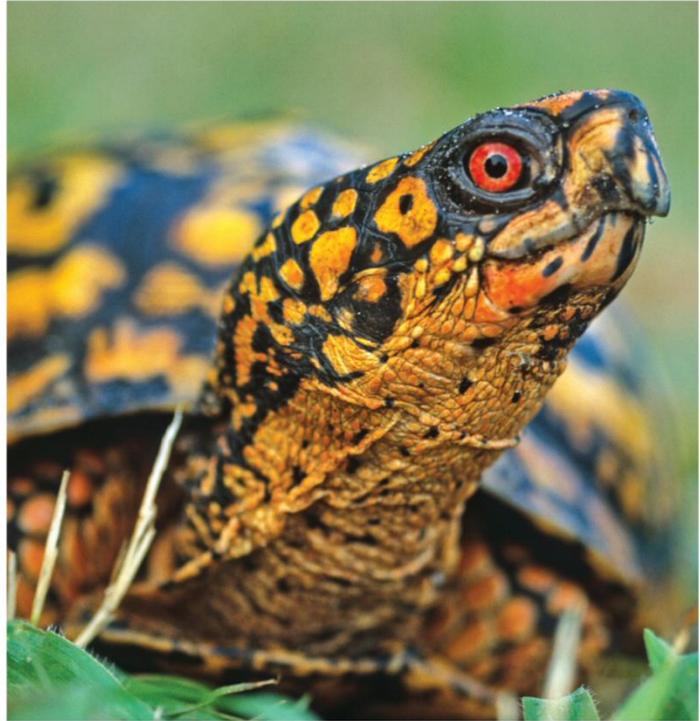
itant to fan out his fins and could even be shredding them on objects he's unable to maneuver around.

Last, if your betta is a relatively new pet, understanding some basic facts may help. Male bettas are the colorful fancy-looking ones who get all the attention. Female bettas, although not as flashy, tend to have short fins. There are some varieties of bettas, such as crown-tails, that have shorter, spiky fins, which are not uniform in length. If they've been crossed with another long-tail betta variety, they may have shorter or irregular fins that don't fan out much.

Jessie Sanders is the owner and chief veterinarian of Aquatic Veterinary Services, a mobile all-aquatic veterinary practice serving California and Nevada.

Are you concerned about your pet? Send your questions to allcreatures@guideposts.org.

calendar



Box turtles are just one of many animals that hibernate.

NATIONAL BIRD DAY

JANUARY 5

A sparrow flew into Judy Gabriel Behr's window. She didn't think it would survive. Her husband had other ideas (page 22).

GROUNDHOG DAY

FEBRUARY 2

Robert Boggs was inspired by his mom's love of all creatures, including Crisco, the rescued groundhog. Read his tribute to her on page 44.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE DAY

FEBRUARY 22

Which animals hibernate and how do they do it? Plus, why it's important for us not to disturb them (page 46).



Groundhogs: garden gurus

I'll never forget you

Special ways we remember our companions

“WESTERN RIDING LESSONS.”

I passed the sign every day on my way to work. I'd never ridden a horse—didn't grow up around them—but after I moved to Florida, I noticed that they were everywhere. One day I followed the sign. Riding came quickly to me. Soon I was spending all my free time at the stable. And I wanted a horse of my own.

My instructor had two for sale—one was a male Appaloosa, and the other a female Arabian. I thought I would go with the Arabian, but then I met them. I didn't really have a choice. The Appaloosa trotted right up to me, nickering softly. His name was Echo. At 13 years old, he was calm and steady. A former competitive trail horse, he sensed

I was new to riding and showed his patience. I loved brushing his dark, tangled mane.

Five years later Echo started to go blind. Then he was diagnosed with cancer. He lived the last of his days out to pasture, good-natured to the end.

I kept several locks of that dark mane. Recently I found an artist who specializes in horse sculptures. She fired Echo's hair onto a custom ceramic piece that sits in my living room, next to his halter and some photos. It reminds me of the wonderful 10 years we had together.

—*Rita Waitt*, Weeki Wachee, Florida

Do you commemorate your pet in a special way? Share it with us! Send a photo to allcreatures@guideposts.org.



Rita's beloved Appaloosa, Echo, lives on in this ceramic bust adorned with locks from his mane.



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 **all creatures**
The Animals Who Share Our Lives



safe, together

The Purple Leash Project makes sure people who are escaping domestic abuse don't have to leave their pets behind

By **Celeste Huttes**, Contributing Editor

For people who experience domestic violence, the bond with a pet can be a lifeline, bringing emotional support, companionship and even physical protection. So it's no surprise that as many as 65 percent of domestic violence victims are unable to escape their abuser because they're worried about their pet. Thanks to the Purple Leash Project—a partnership between the nonprofit RedRover and the pet food company Purina—fewer survivors will be faced with that impossible choice.

We talked to **Nicole Forsyth**, CEO and president of RedRover, and **Noelle Coyne**, director of shelter and housing services for Safe Voices, about how the Purple Leash Project is building safe spaces where abuse survivors and their pets can find refuge—and begin healing—together.

How did the Purple Leash Project come about?

Nicole: At RedRover, we help people and animals in crisis. Early on, we recognized the importance of people and pets escaping domestic abuse together. We made this an area of focus, and Purina wanted to help,

FROM LEFT, CLOCKWISE: COURTESY RESCUERBUILD;
NICOLE FORSYTH; NOELLE COYNE



so the Purple Leash Project (PLP) was born. Purple represents domestic violence awareness, and the leash symbolizes the unbreakable bond we have with our pets. The project provides funding, labor and other assistance to help make domestic violence shelters pet-friendly across the United States.

PLP is an extension of RedRover's Safe Housing program, which aims for 25 percent of U.S. domestic violence shelters to be pet-friendly by 2025. Since 2012, RedRover has awarded 125 grants totaling more than \$1.2 million to such shelters across the country.

Clockwise, from left: Pet-friendly renovations; Nicole Forsyth; Noelle Coyne

In 2019, Safe Voices became Maine's first pet-friendly domestic violence shelter. Why did you want to work with PLP?

Noelle: Those fleeing domestic violence need an immediate and confidential place to go because there are people out there trying to hurt them. Abusers will go after whomever is vulnerable, including pets and children, in their efforts to manipulate, dominate and control. We are currently the only place in the state where a family can go to with their pet. PLP created a



life-changing, and potentially life-saving, experience for our residents.

Tell us about the pet-friendly renovations at Safe Voices.

Noelle: Once a customized plan was in place, a nationwide team of volunteers from RedRover, Purina and GreaterGood.org got to work. Over a three-week period, pet-friendly flooring was installed in four of the shelter's seven bedrooms, where pets stay with their owners. (The other three bedrooms are reserved for people who require or desire pet-free accommodations.)

Volunteers installed bamboo fencing around the yard so dogs can roam freely. They also added a dog-washing station and a clean-up station to make it easy for residents to pick up after their pets. Basement space was converted to kennels with doggie doors that provide direct access to a safe outdoor area. The dogs are taken to the kennels when their owners are working, at school or away for an extended period. From raised dog beds to cute bridges and canopies where cats can climb and nap, PLP made our shelter welcoming for pets, because leaving their home is traumatic for them too.

Nicole: RedRover begins the renovation process with a thorough on-site consultation. We spend a lot of time discussing and walking shelter staff through different scenarios.

PLP also donates pet food and supplies to grant recipients and offers guidance on policy changes if needed. In some cases, like Safe Voices, we work with the local Humane Society to ensure that all resident animals are up to date on vaccinations.

How many U.S. shelters are pet-friendly?

Nicole: When PLP was launched in 2019, only about 10 percent of domestic violence shelters in the United States allowed pets. Thanks largely to PLP grants and volunteers, that number rose to 17 percent in 2020.

What if a shelter can't accommodate pets because of landlord or zoning restrictions?

Nicole: RedRover's Safe Housing program provides funding to create a separate designated area at local animal shelters for temporary housing of pets belonging to domestic violence survivors.

There are times, too, when a victim suffers such severe anxiety or depres-



From left: Kitty climbing space; two happy volunteers; Sigi snoozing outdoors at Safe Voices

sion that she is unable to properly care for a pet. In these cases, RedRover's Safe Escape program helps domestic violence survivors pay to temporarily board their pets.

Tell us about RedRover's larger mission to help animals in crisis.

Nicole: We're kind of like the American Red Cross for animals. We go to areas affected by natural disasters and help rescue and shelter animals until they can be reunited with their owners. We have a network of more than 4,000 trained volunteers across North America who are prepared to respond to disasters at a moment's notice. These same volunteers often provide free labor for pet-friendly shelter renovations. We also offer financial assistance to owners who can't afford to pay a pet's emergency medical expenses. There's been a big need for this due to Covid.

What are some of the survivors' stories that stay with you?

Nicole: I remember hearing the story of a survivor who was so controlled by her abuser that she had lost perspective on her own worth. But one day as she was being attacked, she watched her two small dogs

hiding under the bed shaking, and she could see her fear reflected in their eyes. That empowered her to leave.

Noelle: One survivor was able to escape with her two dogs, who had truly saved her life on more than one occasion. One of the dogs had been injured trying to protect her. She lived in her car for a solid month with these two large dogs until she discovered Safe Voices.

There was another survivor who initially arrived at Safe Voices without her dog while renovations were underway at the shelter. Those first few weeks, she was really struggling. But once she was able to bring her dog in, she opened up and started mingling. Today she gives back to other survivors. Things really changed when her dog was able to come to the shelter.

What impact do you see in shelters that PLP has made pet-friendly?

Noelle: Over the years, we've sheltered folks with service animals or therapy animals and you could see the difference they make. Pets bring a comforting, calming presence—not just to their owners, but also to all the residents.

Nicole: The shelters tell us that residents are more open in therapy when pets are around, and the shelter feels more like home to kids. Pets help you believe that you are lovable. 🐾

Go to SafePlaceforPets.org to find a pet-friendly domestic violence shelter in your area.

Keeper of the Sparrow

The poor little thing flew right into our window
and dropped to the grass

By **Judy Gabriel Behr**, Williamsville, New York

I happened to look up from my dusting just as a sparrow smacked into the window and fell, stunned. We had recently repositioned our ficus tree in front of the window to get more sunlight. Could the bird have been aiming for it? *Please, God, let him be all right*, I prayed as I hurried outside, hoping to see the bird shaking off his misadventure. My husband, Dennis, followed close behind.

My heart sank when I came around the corner and saw that the little bird was lying perfectly still on the ground. Deathly still. My stomach churned and I looked away. I couldn't bear to touch him, but I couldn't stand the thought of just leaving him there to be eaten by cats or foxes.

"Oh, no," Dennis said.

"Could you please take care of him?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied. Breathing a sigh of relief, I went back inside and immediately moved the tree so there would be no more plant-related casualties. I heard the garage door opening. I couldn't even ask Dennis how he was taking care of things. On

trash night, I said a special prayer for the sparrow.

Over the next couple of weeks, I avoided the garage. It made me sad to think of the demise of that helpless creature. Whenever I needed something, I asked Dennis to get it for me, and he did so without complaint.

THEN ONE SUNDAY I found myself alone in the house. I'd sent Dennis to the store to pick up a few things for a dinner party we were having that night, and I needed a tablecloth from the garage. *Judy, it's been two weeks. You can do this*, I thought. I entered bravely and spotted the cloth in a wheelbarrow. *No sad thoughts*, I told myself. *God watches over the sparrow as he watches over me*. I lifted up the tablecloth, only to stumble backward as something flew out at me.

"What on earth?" My eyes widened in recognition. The sparrow! He wasn't dead after all. My heart filled with joy. I opened the garage door and waved goodbye as the sparrow flitted off into the yard. But just what had taken place here?



ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO

I heard Dennis's car pull up and ran to the front door. "Guess what happened!" I called. "That sparrow wasn't dead after all. He was recovering in my tablecloth in the garage."

"Well, I would hope so," Dennis

said. "I've been bringing him worms and water every day. You did say to take care of him."

I was so lucky to have a husband who listened so closely. And a God who watches over us all. 🐾

A Dogface Soldier's New Mission

He'd been searching for the sense of purpose he found in the Army. He never guessed the plan God had for him

By Omar Brooks

North Franklin Township, Pennsylvania



I'd finished running errands, but I was taking my sweet time getting home. The dog we'd agreed to foster—our first—would be there by now. No doubt already stinking up the house. Chewing stuff. Shedding everywhere. *God, what am I getting myself into?*

Dogs were my wife Nicole's thing. I didn't need a fur ball around to make me happy. Just the opposite. For years I'd told myself I'd never get serious with a woman who owned a dog. Then I met Nicole, a waitress at one of my favorite restaurants. We started dating. It was a few months before she introduced me to Lotus, her big slobbery Olde English Bulldogge.

"I would be a mess without her," Nicole said. "She's gotten me through so much."

By then I was crazy about Nicole. If she loved Lotus, then I could learn to live with the dog. Lotus was six. Not an unruly puppy, at least.

Nicole and I were both going through divorces and dealing with depression and anxiety. I knew what she meant about having something, someone to count on. I had served seven years in the Army, in the 3rd Infantry Division, known as the dog-face soldiers, oddly enough. Though I'd been out for a while, I struggled with civilian life. Nothing gave me that same sense of mission, that feeling I was doing God's work. There was this emptiness inside me that wouldn't go away.

Omar feels the love from their latest foster.

Except when I was with Nicole. She made the world feel like a brighter place, even if her dog outranked me. Where Nicole saw undying affection, I saw drool. That didn't change after we married and had our first child, our daughter Zaida.

Over time I made my peace with Lotus, even warmed up to her a little. I liked to run to clear my mind, and she'd run with me. Her ears would perk up as I made up my own cadences, singing out loud like I was back at Fort Stewart, Georgia, in the 3rd Infantry. At those moments there was this connection between us. I could sort of understand what Nicole was talking about.

Last summer Lotus passed away. She was almost 12. I'll admit it, I was sad. Nicole was devastated. I had to do something. But none of the low-maintenance hypoallergenic dogs I found for sale online interested her.

"Maybe we should foster dogs," she said. "There are so many who need loving homes."

"I don't know," I said. "Won't they have issues?" Part of me had hoped we might have a break before getting another dog. Nicole was pregnant. Zaida was three and into everything. Didn't we have enough going on?

Nicole found an organization nearby, Bridge to Home Animal Rescue. There were forms to fill out. A home visit. Our job was to evaluate the dogs and see how they behaved in different situations, to help make the best match with a new owner. Within days of being approved as a foster family,



we got a call from president Tracey Crompton. “We have a dog for you,” she said. “His owner passed away, and he has nowhere to go.”

NOW OUR FIRST FOSTER PET had been dropped off at our house. I couldn’t postpone going home any longer — Nicole was expecting me. I opened the door. The house was quiet. Zaida was down for a nap. I peeked in our bedroom. Nicole was lying in bed. In her arms was a mop of unkempt brown fur. “Isn’t he adorable?” she said. “His name is Cubby. He’s a shih tzu.” He looked like an Ewok from the *Star Wars* movies. Not in a good way.

“Wow,” I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. “He’s a real...cutie.”

I went into the living room and stretched out on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. I’d been looking for answers ever since I’d left the Army.

It was hard to describe the fulfillment I’d felt while serving. I’d enlisted right out of high school. I loved the discipline, the camaraderie, the total

commitment demanded of me. I was serving our country and doing God’s work. I thrived in the Army and made sergeant before I was 21. I fell in love with a civilian woman and got married. Everything was falling into place.

Each morning at Fort Stewart after reveille at 0630 we proudly sang the words to “Dogface Soldier,” a World War II tune penned as a tribute to the 3rd Infantry. “I wouldn’t give a bean to be a fancy pants Marine; I’d rather be a dogface soldier like I am.” For us dogface soldiers, no obstacle was too big to overcome. We always found a way.

I was assigned to an antiaircraft system battalion, a rapid deployment unit. Every day we trained on our weapons, repeating every step, down to the most minute detail. There was no room for error. Lives were on the line. For the first time, I was part of something bigger than myself.

THEN CAME SEPTEMBER 11. Our country went to war. In January 2003, my

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unit deployed to Kuwait, primed to lead the ground attack all the way to Baghdad. We dodged bullets. At one point, hundreds of angry Iraqis surrounded our vehicle. Tanks got blown up by roadside bombs. Some of my comrades lost their lives. I saw enough to scramble my mind.

When the deployment was over, I couldn't be around crowds and felt on edge all the time. My marriage fell apart. I chose not to re-up. Therapy and medication for PTSD and, of course, meeting Nicole helped me feel like myself again, but my sense of purpose was gone.

I'd hoped I'd find it again through work. I got hired by a big-box hardware store and was on a management track, but I couldn't get excited about power tool sales. Then I tried manufacturing, followed by running my own industrial safety supply business. It all left me cold. All that time in the military, my years as a dogface soldier, learning to think strategically and make things happen—if

Fostering dogs has become a family affair. Daughters Zaida and Waverly take it all in.

that was part of God's plan, I wished I knew what he was preparing me for.

Finally I took a job as a correctional officer at a state prison, thinking that it would feel like the military. But there wasn't the same sense of accomplishment. The inmates weren't going to better their lives because of me. I stayed because the pay and benefits were good for supporting a family. I had a wife who meant the world to me. A beautiful daughter and another on the way. Why wasn't that enough?

LYING THERE ON THE CARPET, I felt something wet against my cheek. I turned and found myself face-to-face with Cubby. His tongue stroked my face. Lovingly. Urgently. As if he sensed I needed healing. Then something broke inside of me—the rugged armor I'd built up over the years. The next thing I knew, I was cradling that little brown mop in my arms.

Nicole appeared in the living room doorway. She started taking pictures with her phone. “Look at my big handsome man loving on little Cubby,” she said. “These pics will be great for helping him find a home.”

I looked at Cubby. I’d thought he was here for Nicole to take care of. It never occurred to me that I had something to offer. There was a home to be found. That meant networking. Promotion. *I can do videos with Zaida.* I was on fire with ideas. That strategic thinking I’d learned in the military kicked in. I was a man on a mission.

A week later we found a forever home for Cubby. A fellow foster family fell in love with him. It felt great knowing I’d helped give him a new beginning.

A few weeks later we got another call, this time to meet a small plane full of rescue dogs from Kentucky. Seeing all those animals and knowing they had been slated to go to a kill shelter really got to me. What we were doing mattered. Lives were on the line.

A woman led a small black dog to Nicole and me. “Say hi to Cocoa Chanel,” she said. I knelt down and extended a hand. “Hi, beautiful,” I said. Cocoa shrank back.

“It’s common for rescue dogs to be skittish,” the woman said.

I thought Cocoa might settle down at our house, but she stayed huddled in her crate. I got busy putting the word out on Facebook. Almost immediately I got queries. But they didn’t seem right. Cocoa was nervous around

us. She needed an owner who understood what she’d been through.

A couple of weeks went by. Then an e-mail hit my inbox. “Our ten-year-old daughter is adopted,” it read. “She’s loving and kind....” I didn’t have to read any further.

Seeing all those animals and knowing they had been slated to go to a kill shelter really got to me.

We drove 40 minutes to the family’s house. Before I could tell them much about Cocoa, how she would need patience, she was snuggling in the girl’s lap. Meant to be.

IT HAS BEEN TWO YEARS now since Nicole and I started fostering dogs. We’ve found homes for nearly 20 so far—Pomeranians, chihuahuas, bulldogs, mixed breeds. Some suffered from neglect and anxiety, others were blind or had skin problems. We’ve loved them all. It may have taken longer than I would have liked, but I’ve found a way to serve again, to do God’s work. The fact that we help these dogs as a family—Nicole; Zaida; our younger daughter, Waverly; and me—makes it even more meaningful. We might not be precision trained like an Army squad, but don’t count us out. A dogface soldier always finds a way. 🐾



trust him

I FIDGETED AS I SAT in the veterinarian clinic with Sunrise, my golden retriever, waiting for the doctor to come into the room. Blood ran from Sunrise's right ear, down her golden coat, and pooled on the floor. She had ripped it open on some barbed wire fence, and it wouldn't stop bleeding. I gently touched her ear and cooed, "The doctor will get you fixed up." I wished that my own problems could be fixed so easily. I was facing a major decision, which I had prayed about. Just when I thought I had received the answer, I'd begun to doubt and spiral backward.

Sunrise wagged her tail as the veterinarian walked into the room, but when the doctor reached for her ear, she turned her head. No matter how the doctor tried, Sunrise kept her ear out of reach.

Frustrated, the doctor stepped back at the same time I thought of a solution. Sunrise's right ear was next to me. I reached down and gently flipped her ear flap to the left side of her head, the side the doctor was on. The doctor easily examined the ear—Sunrise thought it was me touching her ear.

I grinned. "She wouldn't let you touch it because she didn't trust you." Those words struck me. I had some trust issues, too. My doubts about my decision were the result of not trusting God.

In time, Sunrise healed, and so did I. By investing time with God and recounting his faithfulness toward me, I committed to trust him.

Lord, thank you for your faithfulness. Amen.

—Rebecca Ondov



helping America's animals

CHRIS JANSEN

Kitten Academy, Connecticut

Meet volunteers around the country who are making life better for creatures big and small

By **Peggy Frezon**, Contributing Editor

Who he is

For most of his life, Chris Jansen was a “dog person” who built and raced drones and worked as a computer

programmer in the banking industry. Now retired, Chris is doing something he never expected: caring for dozens of adorable, adoptable cats



The Kitten Academy specializes in pregnant felines and newborns, preparing them for adoption.

and kittens and broadcasting it all via livestream video. The goal? To match the kittens with their forever homes.

What he does

Chris and his wife DJ are the founders of Kitten Academy, run in their home in Monroe, Connecticut. They foster cats from the Danbury Animal Welfare Society (DAWS). The Kitten Academy specializes in caring for pregnant felines and raising kittens until they're ready to be adopted, inviting online viewers

to join in on every playful moment.

Why he does it

Chris grew up with lots of pets, mostly dogs; DJ never had any. When they met, Chris had a golden retriever and two cats. "I joke that she married me because she wanted to be close to my cats." Then DJ said she wanted to spend time around kittens. Chris figured that fostering would be a good way for her to get her feline fix.

They began fostering in 2015 while

living in Illinois. The following year, a local shelter asked them to take care of a pregnant cat. Chris set up a webcam “as a sort of baby monitor to keep an eye on her.” Next came the Kitten Academy YouTube channel so that others could watch mom and, eventually, kittens snuggle, eat, play and sleep.

“It feels good to be doing something for these cats,” Chris says. He was surprised at the response they’ve received. “People tell me that they love watching, because they can’t have a cat in their apartment and this gives them their daily dose. Or they’ve gone off to college and miss their cat. Some have told me how watching has eased their depression. One mom said it helps her autistic child. We never anticipated that we’d be helping humans too.”

How he does it

Every day, Chris cleans all the litter boxes, feeds the cats, cleans the house and administers medication. (They also have seven cats of their own, including four foster fails and one stray that followed Chris home!) He takes photographs of his feline friends to help get them adopted. Once a day he interacts with the cats in front of the camera and talks to viewers. As much fun as it is to think about people enjoying their live playtime, keeping the cats healthy is Chris’s first priority. Some need special attention, like BeBop, who weighed just six pounds

when she delivered her seven babies. DJ names the kittens by themes. BeBop’s litter has a hipster vibe: Artisanal, Bespoke, Ironic, Vintage, Vinyl, Indie and Retro.

The Kitten Academy has a “no-sads” policy: It focuses on the “pawsitive” experiences the cats have at the academy—and the happy homes they end up in—instead of sharing the difficult stories of why these felines needed fostering.

People come from all across the country to adopt from the Kitten Academy, which moved to Connecticut in 2019, though during the pandemic the pickups occur outside. Why would anyone travel so far when kittens are available anywhere? Chris says, “Why wouldn’t someone just marry the boy next door? Sometimes that’s not the one you’re in love with.”

So far they’ve homed more than 200 cats and kittens.

How you can do it too

If you love cats but can’t or aren’t ready to adopt, Chris encourages fostering. “It would be great if every shelter could have every cat raised in a house,” he says. “In a home, they get more one-on-one time with humans and have space to roam. Plus, they’re less stressed and less likely to get sick.” If you can’t foster, try volunteering at a shelter to play with the cats. 🐾

Visit kitten.academy to see adoptable cats and access the Kitten Academy livestream.



last moments

Farewell messages from the animals we love

a garden goodbye

TWO DAYS AFTER my sweet Georgia Puppy died that April, I worked on her memorial garden. A statue of Saint Joseph, miniature gardenia bushes, a white picket fence. And the finishing touch—a lily, planted in the earth right over where my 14-year-old Lab-chow-golden mix was buried. I felt lost without Georgia. So did my Weimaraner, Jasmine, who kept searching for her playmate. I looked at the buds on the new plant and thought, *This lily will die one day, just like Georgia.*

One week later, I woke to the sound of birds chirping. I made my coffee and let Jasmine out the back door. *Wait, what's that?* I followed a burrowed path to Georgia's garden. It was all torn up, the lily and the bushes nowhere to be seen. Then I

heard a whimper coming from the edge of the yard. Jasmine looked up. There was Georgia bounding toward us! She happily tumbled into her friend. Georgia was young again, her long ebony hair shining in the sun. She showered me with slobbery kisses, then ran into the house, looking back once. Just as I followed her inside, I jolted awake. I was lying in bed. It was only a dream. Yet it felt so real. I hurried downstairs and opened the back door. The remnants of a burrowed path, now filled in, led to her garden, which looked undisturbed. I gasped. The lily was in full bloom. For the next six years, I walked that path every April to see the lily live on. Georgia Puppy lives on too—in my heart.

—*Suzanne Tabacik Renaud*
Atlanta, Georgia



lady love

I WAS 19 and at a new job. One day I overheard a coworker say she'd have to put her German shepherd down that evening because it wasn't working out and no one else wanted her. I couldn't let that happen. I offered to take the dog. I picked up the thin, cowering two-year-old after work. It took two weeks for Lady to trust us, but she grew close to my mom and became a wonderful friend to me and my siblings, as well as our cats, birds and other dog. She was gentle, protective and a devoted caretaker. Lady liked to settle at the top of the stairs, where she could see everyone come and go. And she would check our bedrooms at 2 A.M.

At 14, Lady could no longer climb the stairs. We took turns carrying her to her favorite spot. The time came to say goodbye. My mom and I thanked her for her loving us so well. Lady pressed her paw into my palm, then moved it to touch my mom's teary cheek—comforting us, making sure we were okay, up until the very end.

—Lainie Belcastro
Allentown, Pennsylvania

running free

WE LOST OUR beautiful dachshund-schnauzer, TJ, to heart disease in September 2009. He was 15 years old. TJ loved to ride in my husband's delivery truck, play in the snow and make us follow him to bed. He was the sweetest soul. Two months after his passing, I was pulling up to our house and there he was, running down the driveway as fast as he could. I stopped the car and opened the door, but he was gone. For the longest time, I sat there and cried. Then I realized that TJ had come back to say, "Don't cry anymore. Don't be sad. I am happy and free." That vision was a reminder to cherish our pets and be grateful to them for allowing us to be part of their lives.

—Nancy Wheelock
Rochester, Minnesota



How did your pet say farewell?
Send your story to [@allcreatures](https://twitter.com/allcreatures)
[@guidепosts.org](https://www.guidепosts.org).



Creature Comforts

I NOTICED JUST AS WE boarded the plane to Colombia. “Mom, my raccoons! They’re gone!”

“I’m sorry, honey, it’s too late to go back,” my mother said, corralling me and my two siblings.

We were going to visit my dad, a civil engineer who had been transferred to Medellín, where his company had a contract to clean up the Medellín River. We joined Dad for the summer and for two months at Christmastime. This was in the ’80s, when the Colombian drug cartels made it too dangerous for us to play outside or go anywhere without my dad. He worked long hours, so we spent a lot of time in his small apartment. It was hard for me as an eight-year-old to be cooped up far from my friends.

Losing my beloved raccoons—a pair of stuffed toys that stuck together with their Velcro paws—only made it harder. Raccoons were my favorite animal, their eyes kind and curious. To save space in my backpack, I’d attached the toys to the outer strap using their Velcro. They must have fallen off.

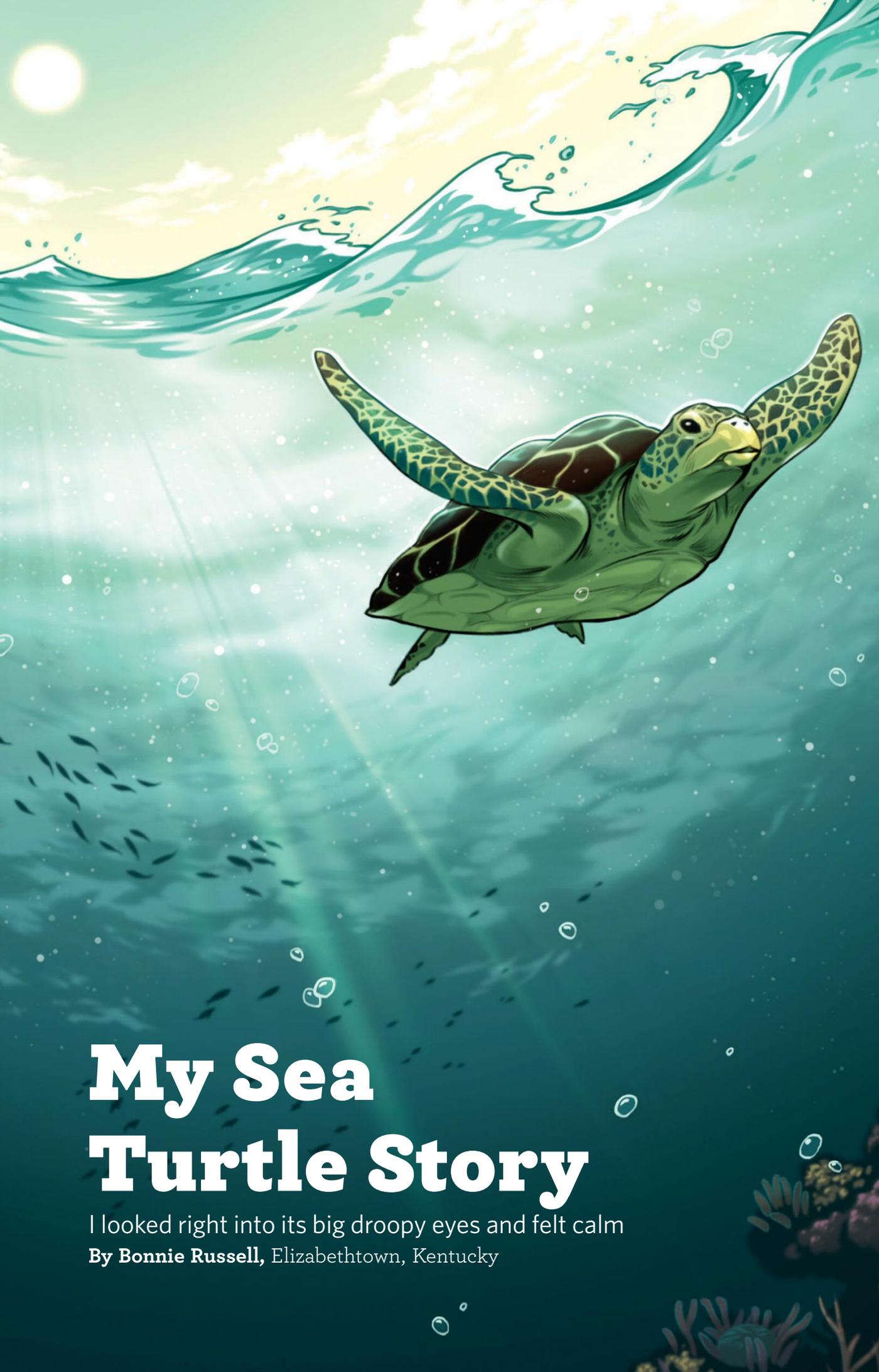
In Medellín, my mom offered to buy me a new stuffed animal, but my raccoons were irreplaceable. The only thing that cheered me up were the weekends. Dad took us on drives through the mountains. One day we discovered a restaurant nestled in the jungle. We sat at a table near the window, and I spotted an animal in a tree. Bright eyes, a ringed tail—“Dad! A raccoon!”

“I don’t think there are any raccoons in South America,” he said, not looking up from the menu. The animal disappeared. But I had seen it....

This happened each time we ate there. *Maybe I’m the only one who can see them*, I thought. It became a kind of game for me to look for their curious eyes peeking from the trees.

One afternoon a waiter tossed some fruit outside. Dozens of my “imaginary” friends came running. Finally, my family saw them too. We learned they were coati—members of the raccoon family. It wasn’t a coincidence that we’d found this off-road eatery. Someone knew I needed my favorite animal.

—Diane Stark, Brazil, Indiana



My Sea Turtle Story

I looked right into its big droopy eyes and felt calm

By **Bonnie Russell**, Elizabethtown, Kentucky

Two more dives. That's all my husband, Larry, and I had left in St. Lucia. We'd spent a week here in paradise. It was almost time to go back to Kentucky. Almost, but not quite.

"What a gorgeous day!" I said as we boarded the dive boat. On the agenda was viewing a wrecked ship plus whatever tropical life we would encounter: fish, coral, maybe even some sea turtles.

"Look who's here." Larry pointed to another couple waving to us, the Brits we'd sat with at dinner the night before. They were novice divers who wanted to hear about the hundreds of dives my husband and I had done between us.

"Everyone buddy up," the dive master announced. "Two by two." Our new friends turned to us. "What do you think of the four of us all buddying up together?" the man asked.

"The four of us?" I said. "I've never done that."

The buddy system is an important part of scuba diving. Buddies were aware of each other at all times, sharing responsibility for their safety, keeping track of how long they'd been underwater and periodically signaling to check air pressure.

Our new friends seemed disappointed by my hesitation. The woman, especially, appeared really nervous. "I'd feel a whole lot better with ex-

perienced divers looking out for us," she confessed.

I felt selfish for not wanting to share my expertise. How could we turn down a chance to help them have the best experience possible?

"I suppose that would be okay," Larry said.

THE BOAT TOOK US out to a spot above the wreck. "We're dropping a dive line," the dive master explained. "It will attach to a dive buoy that's attached to the wreck itself. There's usually a bit of a current around this site, so when you drop into the water, follow the line straight down to the end. You'll spend no more than 15 to 20 minutes around the sunken ship. You should return to the surface with at least 500 psi—meaning 500 pounds per square inch of air pressure—in your oxygen tanks." She gave us a few more safety instructions, reminding us to pause on our ascent to allow our bodies to expel dissolved gas, then had us gear up and get in line for the dive. The instructions were thorough and clear for beginners like our buddies.

Larry and I went to the back of the boat, entered the water and swam to the buoy line to wait for our turn to descend. Our British friends followed behind us. "See you at the bottom," Larry said when it was his turn. He sunk below the surface.

I moved up next. “Could you hold on a minute?” the dive master said. “I want to put the newbies between you and Larry.” I wished my new friends luck, and down they went. “You’re up,” the dive master said then. “Just follow the line down. You won’t have any trouble.”

I started my descent. *This is the murkiest water I’ve ever been in, I thought. Even the lakes in Kentucky are clearer!* But the murkiness wasn’t my biggest problem. The current pushed me, pulled me and spun me until I felt like a load of laundry in a spin cycle. I lost sight of the dive line. I didn’t even know which way was up. Instinctively I looked for Larry. Wherever he was, he was probably focused on our new friends and not me.

I should never have agreed to that buddy system, I thought. But there was nothing to do about it now. I was on my own. *Follow your bubbles, I told myself.* That would lead me back to the surface. I stopped moving entirely, took a deep breath and exhaled. A stream of bubbles rose before me, and I followed closely behind them for what seemed like an eternity. Finally there it was, like a sheet of aluminum foil: the ocean surface. I paused, letting my body adjust, then added a little air to my buoyancy compensator to help me float in my gear. I surfaced.

In the distance I saw the dive boat and waved. The dive assistant waved back but signaled that he couldn’t pilot the boat over to me right away. The other divers were still in the



Bonnie and Larry diving off the coast of St. Lucia

water with the dive master. The boat couldn’t be moved until they were aboard, so instead the assistant stripped down to his bathing suit and dived in.

What a relief! Somebody was coming to my rescue! All that spinning and disorientation had left me shaken. I wanted to get out of the water as soon as possible. The dive assistant was a big guy—and strong. He’d clearly been swimming these waters all his life. But no matter how powerfully he swam, he wasn’t getting any closer. The same currents that had disoriented me held him back. He gave up and returned to the boat.

Oh, no, I thought as I watched him climb on deck. How long did I have to wait here? How far away could the current carry me in that time? Behind me was the curve of a rocky

cove. Beyond that, I knew, was open water and Venezuela in the distance. Was I going to wind up there? I didn't even have my passport! I tipped my head to the sky. "God, this current is under your control," I called out. "Help me!"

I lowered my eyes back to the water and gasped. There in front of me was a sea turtle. *Where did you come from?* I hadn't even heard it surface. The sea turtle was close—closer than wild sea turtles usually got. Even stranger, it didn't dive back under again when it saw me. The two of us remained floating there, face to face. Looking into the turtle's big droopy eyes, I relaxed. My anxiety dissipated. My fear disappeared. And not just my fear of this situation. It was as if every fear I'd ever had was gone. I'd never felt such complete and total peace.

"God, thank you for sending me this friend," I said. "But I also wouldn't mind some Jesus with skin."

The prayer had barely left my lips when I heard the sound of a motor in the distance. The turtle heard it too and disappeared under the surface. By the time the fishing boat got to me the turtle was long gone. The fishermen brought me back to the dive boat, and the panic I'd felt during my ordeal came rushing back.

"I didn't know what happened to you!" Larry said when I climbed aboard. "I had my hands full with my two buddies. One of their regulators wasn't working, and I had to do some buddy breathing. I knew you could take care of yourself, but

when I realized how long we had been separated..."

"You think you were scared," I said. "I'm never diving again."

I was serious. Never again. Without that sea turtle beside me, the mere thought of going under the surface scared me. But Larry wouldn't let me give up. He spent the rest of the morning trying to convince me to give it another try. "You can't let that one bad experience be your last memory of St. Lucia," he said as we got to the boat for the afternoon dive. "This is a drift dive. The boat will follow the divers the whole time. There's no flipping and splashing, just drifting along a coral-covered wall."

FINALLY I AGREED. "But I want to be the last diver in the water," I explained, "so I'll be closest to the boat." I didn't want to have to ask God to send another sea angel to my rescue.

I sunk down into the water and descended to the recommended depth. The current was easy, the scenery beautiful. Fish darted around us. I was glad Larry had talked me into coming for one last look at St. Lucia's underwater world.

A stretch of rainbow-colored coral caught my eye. I watched a shadow move across it. A shadow moving behind me. I turned my head.

It was a sea turtle, in all its glorious, gigantic beauty. I waved excitedly to Larry, who grinned widely. The turtle swam right alongside me for the entire dive. And this time, I hadn't even asked for an angel. ►

Once Upon a Time...

Representative of tranquility and stability, the peaceful turtle finds its way into creation myths of cultures around the world.

Native American

Long ago the earth had



no land, only water, so the spirits lived above it, on an island in the sky. One day Sky Woman fell off the island. When the animals below saw her falling, they wanted to save her and decided to bring soil up from the bottom of the ocean. Little Muskrat dove deep and grabbed a handful

of mud. When she got to the surface though, she realized there was nowhere to put it. Turtle volunteered to put the mud on her back and said she would hold up the land and all the people. Sky Woman was saved, and the land on Turtle's back became North America.

Hawaiian

Honu-po'o-kea believed she was the only sea turtle in the world until she met Honu'ea. They fell in love and decided to have a child. The couple went to the shore. There, Honu-po'o-kea made a nest and buried her egg while Honu'ea

dug a freshwater pond. A short time later, the egg hatched and Kauila was born. Kauila made her home at the bottom of the pond. When she sleeps, bubbles rise to the surface. More often, though, she appears as a young girl keeping watch over the children



happily playing on Punalu'u Beach.

Ancient Chinese

The god Pangu had grown too old to hold up the sky. Rather than let



the heavens fall and crush the earth, he installed four pillars. The pillars stood firm for many years. During that time the goddess Nuwa created humans and animals and filled the earth with them. One day the eastern pillar, Mount

Buzhou, collapsed and tore a hole in the sky. The three remaining pillars cracked under the weight. Nuwa couldn't bear to see anything happen to her creations, so she used the legs of the turtle Ao to create new pillars, saving the Chinese people.

Their Mysterious Ways

IT WAS COLD that Tuesday night in January, even for Butte, Montana. I was at my mom's house, cleaning up after dinner, when my sister, Penny, called from Southern California.

"I can't believe there are no shepherds here for adoption," Penny said.

We've always been a German shepherd family, and Penny wanted a young male to continue the streak. She'd visited all the shelters in her area. Not one had a shepherd.

"It's going to work out, honey," Mom said.

By the time we hung up, it was 25 degrees below zero and snowing hard. I bundled up for the mile walk home with my German shepherd-wolf mix, Duke, who accompanied me to Mom's every week.

"Something tells me you should walk down Park Street tonight," Mom said, patting Duke on the head.

"All right," I said, even though we normally took Galena Street home. I knew how Mom felt about her intuitions.

Within minutes my glasses fogged up. I could barely see. Which way was Park Street? Somehow, Duke knew where to turn. He pulled me to the other side of the block and stopped. I tugged on his leash but he wouldn't budge.

"What's wrong, boy?" Then I heard it—a dog, whining. Through my cloudy lenses, I made out a dark shape.

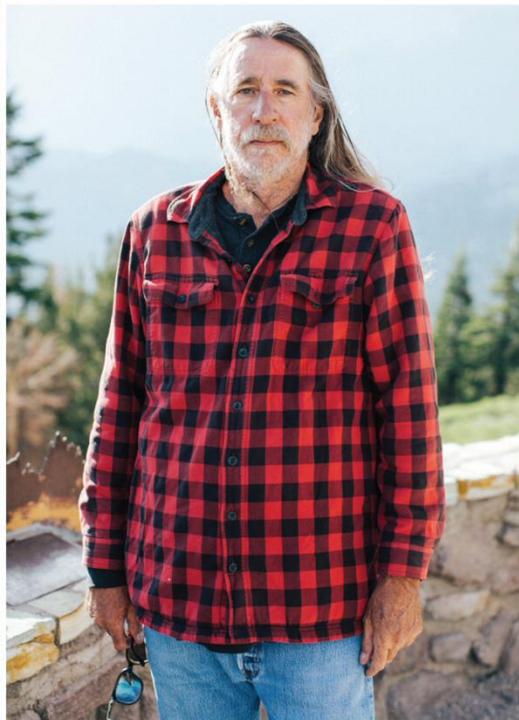
"Come!" I shouted. The dog ran over, sniffed Duke and fell into step with us. He had no collar for me to hold on to, yet he stayed by my side. Finally we got to my house. Duke and the other dog rushed inside. My glasses cleared. There before me stood a young male German shepherd!

For two weeks I called the animal shelter to see if anyone reported a missing shepherd. No one did. I named him Waldo and took him for a checkup. The vet said he was 10 months old and had severe arthritis.

Soon Waldo was on a flight to California. Penny had just moved to Joshua Tree, where a dog with stiff joints would thrive in the desert heat.

Finding Waldo that snowy night was no accident. Like Mom, Duke had a feeling too.

—*Roberta K. Ray*, Butte, Montana



Is This for Real?

Steve Searles isn't a biologist, an animal behaviorist or a forest ranger. Yet he's the reason people and bears in one mountain town coexist peacefully

By **Jim Hinch**, Contributing Editor

A massive wildfire ignited in the Sierra Nevada this past September, rapidly engulfing more than 340,000 acres on the mountains and coming within a dozen miles of the California ski resort town Mammoth Lakes.

Wildlife fleeing from the flames soon appeared on city streets: coyote, deer, foxes. And bears. Lots of bears. Bears wandering the streets. Roaming golf courses. Sleeping on lawns.

Mammoth residents knew what to do. They locked up the trash, put out water to drink and made lots of noise when the four-legged troublemakers got too close.

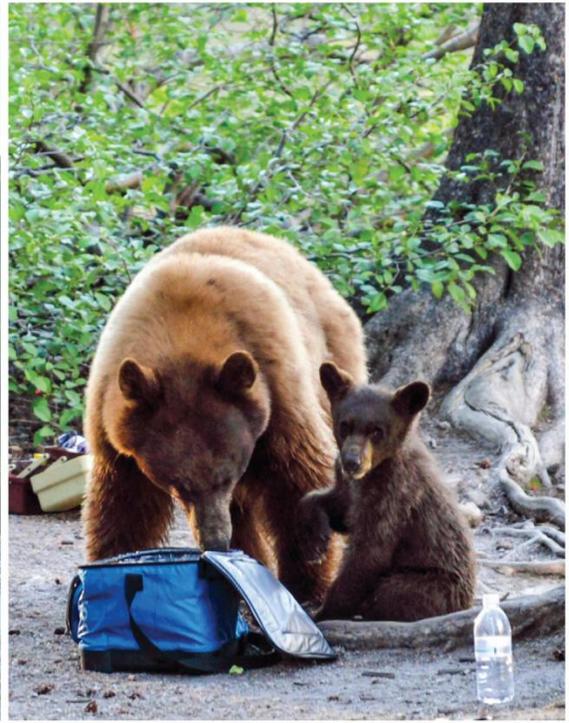
"I'm brokenhearted for the bears.

but I'm encouraged to see our community deal with it so well," says Steve Searles, 61, who has lived in Mammoth for more than four decades. "People are doing a stand-up job."

Actually, that's because of Steve. Until recently he was employed as Mammoth's official bear whisperer, hired to wrangle the bears disrupting the community. (Covid-19 budget cuts halved his salary, and he resigned.)

In many mountain towns, bears are a police or forest ranger problem. In earlier eras, guns were the go-to. Steve pioneered a different approach. Bears can be taught to stay out of trouble with some loud noises, bright flashes of light or pokes with a pole.

FROM LEFT: EYAL NAHMIA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; AKASHA RABUT/ THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX (2); DEBRA BEHR/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



From left: Getting into trouble; Steve Searles; Mammoth Lakes; Mom and cub looking for treats.

The bigger problem, Steve says, is people. Especially in a ski resort town with nearly three million annual visitors from around the world, many of whom are unfamiliar with the ways of the wild.

Ignorant is the most printable adjective Steve uses to describe the behavior he's witnessed over the years, like tossing food to bears for an Instagram shot or trying to ward them off with a garden hose.

Half of Steve's job was educating town residents, and he's still at it after losing his position. "Folks and Friends of Mammoth," he wrote on Facebook shortly after the outbreak of the September fire. "More bears have arrived in town to find safety. Please take care of each other and them. Thank you."

Steve has no formal training as a wildlife expert. He grew up surfing in Southern California, then moved to Mammoth when a friend offered him a job. He worked in construction, skied, hunted. Mammoth was expanding rapidly in those days, and bears soon

discovered it was an ursine wonderland of garbage and goodies.

Town officials asked Steve, as a hunter, to "take care" of 16 problem bears. But something happened.

"I saw they were incredible animals," he says. "I don't have words to describe it."

He asked officials if he could try conditioning the bears to avoid dumpsters and food sources.

"They said, 'Sure, do whatever you want, as long as you kill them in the end.' I never killed a single one."

Steve's unorthodox methods were so successful, the city kept him on.

He drives around town in a Ford F-250 pickup equipped with lights, a siren and a big toolbox. He gets to know bears from birth and works with them over many seasons on seeking meals elsewhere.

"The lesson I've learned from bears is humility," Steve says. "If I had their kind of power, it would go to my head. But they always cooperate here in town. They're remarkable." 🐾

Dear Mom...

IT'S BEEN THREE YEARS, Mom, and your old neighbors still don't understand your garden in Greenville: lush southern magnolia; evergreen gordonia; dirt brimming with native pollinators, snakes and bees. You made it an Eden. I've done my best to care for the plants and animals you left behind, but folks here think it's overgrown, too wild. Then again, I've always felt safe in wild places.

When I was a boy growing up in the house Dad built in the Blue Ridge Mountains, we'd hike through the deep woods together. You'd say, "Look, a robin's nest," or "Robert, up there! That's a Carolina wren." You knew everything about the outdoors—which birds called to one another through the trees, how to turn creeping vines into baskets. You were a country girl, through and through.

Your family—Swedish immigrants who'd learned to coax wheat stalks from the earth—learned everything they could about South Carolina, but even to them, you were peculiar. Maybe because you always believed that nature didn't just serve us, but was part of us.

From you, I learned to never take more than I needed. You'd take an umbrella and hang ornaments on it before you'd cut down a healthy pine in December. I like to think that at four foot eleven, closer to the earth than most of us, you felt things that we didn't.

Remember that New York transplant, the former college athlete who bought the house next door? I still laugh about how you caught him clinging to the lowest branch of a tree, pointing in horror at a snake. You pulled white opera gloves over your elbows—your thick gardening gloves had gone missing—and carried the snake to your yard. "This snake is welcome in my garden," you said to our new neighbor. He clearly didn't know the difference between a venomous cottonmouth and a harmless kingsnake. "He'll be useful in recycling my moles and voles."

Animals knew they could trust you, like the injured chipmunk you rescued and all the stray and feral cats that would follow you out of the woods and into our home. I shouldn't have been surprised when you saved Crisco the



From top: A young Melree Boggs; Josie stays close.

groundhog from a pack of dogs in our yard, back when we lived in the mountains, clanging pots until they dispersed. He knew you were on his side—even when he gobbled up all the lettuce you’d grown to make Swedish soup.

You tended to everyone, Mom, but especially Dad and me. When Dad lost his mobility and had trouble moving around the house in the mountains, you convinced him to move to Greenville. Were you heartbroken to leave those woods? You didn’t show it. You woke up every morning at five to tend to your new garden. Your faith held you steady, wherever you were, God always present as you watered your plants. “He talks to me,” you’d say.

You know I’ve led a winding life. Boarding school to college to graduate school in Massachusetts. I was a banker, a Methodist minister and now a university professor. You never made me feel as if I had to know exactly what I wanted to do. You wanted me to be free, to explore what was out there—much like your animal companions.

Then Dad died, my marriage ended and my dog died, all within six months. You didn’t tell me to move on but let me grieve, remaining close in case I needed you. Just like Josie, our rescue mix, did for you when your dementia took over.

You were ninety-nine and three months when you passed into the next world. Perhaps the earth held onto you for so long because you understood each other.

I couldn’t bring myself to sell the Greenville house and have made it my job to care for the property, throwing myself into the cycle of nature. Every autumn, I’m reminded of how you’d delight in the changing colors and all the birds that come and go. I sit and watch them build their nests and smile to myself thinking about how you’d look out for the mama birds returning to their babies.

I miss you, Mom. But in a way, you return to me through the moles and voles, snakes and groundhogs. I’ve been caring for them all, observing and celebrating the beauty and purpose of all God’s creatures. And, of course, tending your misunderstood garden.

Love, Robert

By Robert Boggs, Greenville, South Carolina



From top: Melree in 1936; Robert holds Crisco.



The Big Sleep

For some animals, hibernation is a matter of survival

By **Peggy Frezon**
Contributing Editor



On cold, dark days, are you tempted to curl up for a long winter's nap? Some animals do, but for them, it's critical. Here's what you need to know about hibernation and the creatures that do it.

What Happens?

Wild animals have developed a variety of strategies to help them survive adverse winter conditions such as frigid temperatures, snow and ice, and a scarcity of food. Some hide food stashes in preparation for the cold months. Some migrate to warmer climates. And others hibernate—a means of lowering their metabolism in order to conserve energy and store fat.

Hibernating is not the same as sleeping. These animals enter an extended state of torpor (decreased physiological activity). Their body temperature drops, and their breathing and heart rate slow, often dramatically. An Arctic ground squirrel's temperature can fall to -2.9 degrees Celsius, and a bat's heart rate can slow from hundreds of beats per minute to just 11. The heart of a hibernating wood frog actually stops beating.

Which Animals Do It and How?

Bears are probably the first animals you think of when it comes to hibernation. Because they are easily roused, though, some scientists don't consider them true hibernators. Skunks fall into this category too.

Small mammals, such as dormice, are the most typical hibernators. This is because their little bodies make it more difficult for them to stay warm in cold weather. Other mammals that lie dormant are chipmunks, hedgehogs and groundhogs.

Bumblebees hibernate—but only the queen bee, who digs a hole in the ground and stays there until spring arrives.

Some snakes sleep through the winter, with hundreds together to share body heat. Bats huddle together in caves. Box turtles hibernate in underground burrows, and



Chipmunks, hedgehogs and skunks all settle into a slumber to recharge and weather the winter.

wood frogs cozy up in hollow logs or leaf piles. Hibernating animals are usually well hidden. If you come upon one in your yard or while you're hiking, it's important not to disturb it. Waking up from hibernation requires a lot of energy. Don't deplete hibernating animals of that energy, which is essential for their survival.

What Can We Learn?

Hibernation is an amazing adaptation, allowing animals to survive without damage to their body systems. Understanding how that's possible can give scientists insight into human conditions. We can learn how cells survive very cold temperatures, enabling doctors to better preserve human tissues for transplants. We can get clues for treating muscle disorders and degenerative bone diseases since hibernators don't experience muscle and bone deterioration.

Studying hibernation may also help us better understand neuro-

degenerative diseases. Research shows that a particular protein associated with Alzheimer's disease is renewed in the brain cells of some hibernating animals, such as squirrels, during their deep sleep.

That leads to the question: Could people hibernate? Most scientists say no, but ever since lemurs were discovered to do so, some experts have wondered if a human hibernation-like state is possible, because lemurs are primates that are genetically similar to us. For now, though, if you need to conserve some energy this winter, a nap will do. 🐾

PEGGY FREZON is the author of *The Dog in the Dentist Chair: And Other True Stories of Animals Who Help, Comfort, and Love Kids*. She and her husband rescue senior golden retrievers and are therapy dog handlers. Connect with Peggy at peggyfrezon.com and on Facebook at facebook.com/peggyfrezonbooks.