

Commentary

Critters in the Cottage

There is no question about it: in our summer cottage, the critters are in charge. We've made peace with them. But they're in control. Parading through, taking up residence and refusing to leave.

There was a daddy longlegs in the bathtub. When any of us showered, we carefully guided him to the soap dish where he would be safe until we finished. Then we would return him to the freedom of the bathtub. We all had this same routine but never bothered to mention it to the other. As if this personal relationship with the bathroom spider was a private matter. Did he like all the attention and the care of human hands keeping him unharmed? For some reason we never remembered to put him outside during the day. He seemed happy in this unlikely location, and we lived side by side with that one accommodation. As I closed the cottage in September, I returned to place him on a mossy rock underneath the pine tree. I hope he wintered well and found some spidery friends.

Acrobatic spiders regularly spin their webs overnight near the ceiling or in unlikely places from the toaster to the dining room curtain or from the bed to the bureau. Walking through them gives me an uneasy sensation of silk clinging to my skin. But I love the webs outside attached to trees where they shimmer after the rain. One June day swaying in the hammock I watched a spider on his newly spun web attached to a branch. He skipped over the web, snagged a fly, wrapped it swiftly with his silk and twirled his legs so fast it looked like there were a dozen of them. He then scrambled over to deposit it towards the outside of the web for a later live snack. This provided a riveting afternoon's entertainment as he returned to feast.

Then one July a baby squirrel sneaked inside the back door and dashed around the downstairs all summer long. There he was one minute, out of sight the next. For a month he lived royally off the bowl of nuts in the dining room before we realized what was happening. By then he was full sized, and his scurrying at night became louder and louder. We couldn't get him out and were beyond setting a mouse trap for him. We never found where he considered home. But in the fall when we moved back to town, unable to get him out, I just locked the door and left.

Another year larger animals were mysteriously appearing in the house. A raccoon with his masked face waddled hurriedly across

the living room and fortunately disappeared. Some moles and several chippies came and went. This began to resemble a circus with a parade of clowns coming from all directions. What was going on? Their numbers were increasing—these creatures belonged in the wild. Four tree stumps serve as the foundation of this 1880 cottage, each supporting a corner, and there is nothing but dirt underneath the building. One morning I noticed a fireplace brick had fallen out, and I could look down the gapping hole to the dirt. Apparently this convenient opening was their entry point, and the wildlife were crawling through the cavity. Just checking out our situation as if going through revolving doors of a tourist hotel. No one stayed for an extended visit or set up summer residence with us. I summoned the bricklayer who came to re-cement the bricks. The wild life must have felt we were closing their open door. But that took care of that.

Mice appear periodically, especially in the winter, and once laid their litter in my lingerie drawer where they fancied my laciest nighties. One early spring, reaching in to take out a slip, my fingers felt something unexpected and alive. My reaction was both revulsion and fascination. I quickly withdrew my hand and then spotted a clutch of four newborn mice among the nighties and examined the tiny pink bodies and mousey faces with their eyes still closed. And immediately called my husband to get them out. The same day while searching for a warm sweater, I found that five had large holes in them obviously chewed by mice who had left behind fluffs of wool and their droppings. I had carefully put the sweaters away in heavy plastic bags for the winter. Having hand knit each one through the years, they were especially important to me. By then the mice had courteously cleared out of the cottage for the summer, but what to do in the fall? Enough was enough. Killing them with d-Con seemed too severe a solution, so we decided to put mothballs in all the drawers, in the plastic bags, on the beds and even sprinkled them on the floor. We returned next spring and found no mice. But the cottage reeked of mothballs. The clinging naphthalene odor hung heavy inside and outside the cottage, and it didn't leave until mid-June. So even then the critters had the last word.

Alice Outwater