

Ticked Off

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I suppose I'll always think of walruses when I see a full moon. Time hasn't begun to diminish the memory of that bright August night when I was the designated sitter for a pair of baby walruses. My official title was public information officer at the zoo where I worked, but on that night, I was an impassioned volunteer.

The walrus calves were about three months old. They had reportedly been abandoned by their mothers on a beach in Alaska and "rescued from the wild." Over the course of several days the pair had been passed from one wildlife agency to the next, and by the time they reached the zoo they were quite sick.

During the next few days, I spent most of my time at the marine mammal exhibit accommodating reporters and photographers from various media. The news of the calves' plight roused concern far and wide, and offers of donations and assistance rolled in. With each trip to the exhibit, I would have to ask the volunteers and staff to stop picking ticks off the calves. The ticks needed to be removed, but the little ones could not sleep while constantly being picked at. As a result, when the tweezing stopped, the babies would nod off, ruining the photo opportunity. Tweezing would resume as soon as I escorted the media away. I watched this round-the-clock activity for two days before I commented on it to one of the biologists. The offended expert snapped back that he knew a little bit more than I did about caring for juvenile pinnipeds, and the tweezing continued.

On the third day, the tired marine mammal keepers asked for volunteers among the zoo staff to sit with the calves during the night. The first shift was from seven in the evening until one in the morning, and the second shift ran until seven that same morning. I immediately volunteered for a double shift.

After wolfing down dinner and showering that evening, I quickly dressed in long johns, jeans and a sweatshirt. It might have been August, but

the night would be cool and the wet concrete in the marine mammal exhibit would be cold. I arrived back at the zoo fifteen minutes early to receive instructions.

“Where do I start?” I asked Gary, the keeper I’d been told to report to.

“Here, get into these overalls and boots, and I’ll show you how to hunt ticks,” he said. “I don’t know where they picked ‘em up, but they’re covered with ‘em.”

As I climbed into the yellow Helly Hansen overalls and black rubber boots, Gary demonstrated his tick-picking technique.

“Be very careful when you pull the body out that you get the head, too. It’s easy to snap it off and leave it under the skin. You grab him and pull . . . like . . . so!” He held up his trophy for both of us to inspect. Then he handed me the tweezers.

“I think I can do that,” I said, taking the tool and squatting beside the male. “I see one.”

“Good!” Gary said. “Gently grab the body—be sure not to squeeze too hard because it’ll explode—now pull gently, gently . . .”

“Got it!” I declared, holding up the fat, wiggling bug. “Now what would you like me to do with it?”

“Take this paper towel and give the little S.O.B. a good, hard pinch.” As I squashed the swollen tick between the heels of my hands, Gary stood and signaled for me to follow.

“C’mon into the kitchen. I’ll show you where the formula and clean bottles are, and then you’ll be good to go.”

The zoo was just closing and there was a whirl of activity in the back of the marine mammal exhibit as the whales, harbor porpoise, seals, sea lions, and resident walruses were checked on one last time. I tucked a flashlight and radio into my oversized right pocket and a water bottle and two granola bars into the left. As I said good-bye to Gary, I turned my attention to the gray-brown babies scooting toward me. They both had colds, so along with wiping their runny noses and eyes it was important to keep them relatively dry. That would be difficult since they needed to be hosed off each time they did their business.

Within a few minutes the pair warmed up to me and stopped crying. Their cries were puppy-like whines punctuated with heavy sighs. I settled my-

self on the ground with my back against the chain-link fence and coaxed them over with a huge bottle of milk. In the wild, walrus nurse for eighteen to twenty-four months, and grow quickly on mother's milk. Our formula was a mixture of heavy cream, pureed clams and fish, and Stat, a blend of antibiotics and vitamins.

Zoo officials, who included me, had deliberately not named the pair since there was a good possibility they would die. People get attached to animals with names and we did not want anyone—especially children—becoming attached to these two. The calves were officially referred to as “the male” and “the female.” But tonight, on my watch, they were Buddy and Sissy.

Buddy was not interested in eating, but did want to be in the middle of things while Sissy tried repeatedly to get the huge, flexible orange nipple to stay centered on her tongue. Half an hour later, we were both covered in milk, and she seemed to feel better, but not well enough to play. Walrus calves play much like human babies do, tussling and chasing each other. They even kiss by bumping their faces together. Some suck their flippers as a child would a thumb. Buddy was a flipper-sucker.

At half past eight, the sky was glowing pink and orange. As a hush descended on the park, I whispered a prayer of gratitude for the extra police patrols on full-moon nights like tonight. As night fell, Buddy pushed his way onto my lap. Although he was only a few months old and undernourished, he still weighed nearly one hundred pounds. For several minutes, there seemed to be flippers everywhere as Buddy and Sissy jockeyed for position on top of me. I had read quite a bit about walrus during the past three days and knew their mothers would have been nuzzling and grooming them throughout the night. I reveled in being Mom tonight, but couldn't help thinking about their mothers.

Female walrus are sexually mature at about six or seven years of age and only give birth every two to three years, so calves are precious. Born in early April and May, they weigh between 85 and 160 pounds. During the first few months, mother and baby are inseparable. The pair stays together for several years.

Like most babies, it took Buddy and Sissy a long time to fall asleep. They wheezed and sneezed and sighed and cried. They startled easily, and now and then would fling out their flippers as if to catch themselves from fall-

ing. While they slept, their breathing was labored but more rhythmic. After about an hour they stopped mewling and twitching. I had been stroking their heads for some time and was reluctant to stop for fear of waking them. I loved caressing their soft, rubbery bodies. I loved their hot, fishy breath, and their adorable white mustaches. I wanted as much contact as possible and not with tweezers.

By midnight, I was numb from the cold and lack of circulation. Buddy and Sissy did not like being dislodged, and I heard about it when I returned from my short break and had to start the settling-in process all over again. As I hummed the few lullabies I could recall, I wondered for the umpteenth time how this pair had really ended up here. I did not believe my own press releases. Walrus mothers do not abandon their babies. Female walruses have been known to carry away their dead calves, rather than abandon them, when fleeing from hunters. So how did two calves end up here? I suspected, but did not say, that their mothers were probably killed for subsistence or by poachers. Both issues were politically sensitive. Because the babies were ill, we said instead that their mothers probably had instinctively abandoned them since they were likely to die anyway. Besides, it made a better sound bite to say the zoo had cooperated with wildlife agencies and gone to great lengths to rescue the pair, if only for a short while.

Throughout the early morning hours, I continued to offer bottles, wipe noses, and spray away messes. I thanked heaven quite a few times for the full moon that illuminated—and would commemorate—the experience.

Shortly before the morning shift began at seven o'clock, Brian, the biologist who snapped at me about the ticks two days before, burst through the marine mammal door. Without a greeting he yelled over his shoulder, "How many ticks did you get?"

"Two!" I yelled back over my shoulder.

"Two?" he said, coming back out of the office.

"Yes. One was on my arm and the other was on my neck."

"I meant on the animals!"

"Oh," I said. "None."

"You didn't find a single tick?" he asked sarcastically.

"I didn't look for any."

The door to the exhibit opened again and another biologist, Amy,

skipped down the stairs. “How are the wee ones?” she asked, opening the gate where I was still sitting on the ground with them.

“They slept all night,” I said, letting her help me scoot the female off my legs.

“Good! They needed to,” she said as she reached around the male to roll him off my chest. “How’d it go last night?”

“I wiped their noses a lot. The female took about half a bottle, but the male showed no interest in eating.”

“Hmmm,” she said, “We’re going to need to tube-feed them.” As she offered her hand to help me up, she asked, “how are you?”

“I’m tired but good, and so glad I did this. What a memorable night.”

“We are lucky, aren’t we, to be able to cross paths with these two?”

“Yes,” I said. “Do you think they’ll make it?”

“Oh, I hope so! We’re going to do everything we can for them,” she said cheerfully, although she looked doubtful. “Thanks for staying last night. I know it was good for all of you.”

The calves died within a few hours of each other two days later. Brian blamed me for failing to remove ticks he believed made them weaker. Amy said I should feel good about giving them their only “night off” from the incessant tweezing. I don’t know if I helped or hindered Buddy and Sissy that night, but I know one thing; I was supposed to cross paths with those precious babies, so that I could learn to have without keeping.