

The pets and people in our lives

Aug 25 , 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

A former graduate student of mine insisted on spoiling me at a popular local dumpling restaurant the other day. We ate and ate and, in the end, she paid the bill. In the middle of the meal, anticipating her refusal to let me pick up the tab that was to come, and wanting to show my appreciation, I asked her an innocent question.

“How are your birds doing?”

Well, we had been talking of academic life, Daniel Defoe, “Robinson Crusoe,” and “Moll Flanders,” you see. But I also knew of another love in her life: parakeets, parrots, and ornithology.

My question led to an enthusiastic explanation of what it takes to care for 10 pet birds. I learned a lot in those minutes. I came away from the conversation with some thoughts about the role of animals, sometimes pets, in our lives.

Our media have of late been positively pushing animals at us. In preparing to write this column, I checked a few recent editions of local English newspapers.

This past Monday The China Post published 4 animal-related pieces, and treated readers to a picture of a local celebrity named Ben Chiu dressed as a giraffe (CP 8-19-13 p. 16). One of the articles focused on a festival in India for snake charmers (p. 9). Another, on the same page, spoke of a tourist attraction in Belgium, specifically, shrimp fishing by horseback in a place called Oostduinkerke. The paper also carried news that day about animal rights activists in Taipei objecting to government plans to experiment on healthy dogs with anti-rabies medicine (p. 15). The same page updated readers on the latest gossip about Yuanzai, our long awaited baby panda.

A competing English newspaper ran 5 pieces that same day on animals. We had the de rigeur note on the panda situation, “Zoo mulls ways to give public peek into panda's life” (TT 8-19-13, 2). Then came informative, not to say worrisome, articles on the use of antibiotics for livestock (p. 2), bee-sting therapy in China (p. 4), and bovine IUD to boost livestock production in Argentina.

The same paper put the panda craze in perspective with a perceptive editorial on page 8.

Articles touching on animals were numerous on other recent days as well. Do you remember “Cute little critter found in South American forests” (CP 8-17-13 p.8)? The creature's name may soon pop up in a crossword puzzle. Hint: In 2013, the first carnivore species found in 35 years. Answer: “olinguito.” The little fellow “looks like a mix between a raccoon and a teddy bear.”

That story was not to be outdone, however, by the good news from Cambodia about Giant Ibis. Yes, I said “Giant Ibis.” You know, one of the world's rarest birds, a member of the “critically endangered species” family? There are only 345 of them left in the whole world. Thank heavens then that a local paper said a farmer found a nest for an actual Giant Ibis in the Meking Flooded Forest area (TT 8-21-13 p. 6).

Closer to home, there was also the oddball story about the snake farm owner over in Tainan. Talk about inverted advertising! This guy had himself photographed force-feeding a deadly cobra that has lost its appetite and refuses to eat. (TT 8-21-13 p. 5).

The same edition brought reassuring news that things are looking up for President Obama and his family. The Obamas got a new Black Portuguese Water Dog recently to keep their other one company (p. 7). Her name is Sunny.

Well, I guess those are enough animal stories. Obviously, I did not enter the debate about or seriously touch the feral-badger slash rabies problem. There is no humor to be had there.

So, what is the point?

The point is that animals are irreplaceable gifts in life. We need to take good care of them. At the same time, we ought to question the amount of time and care we devote to our furry friends and other pets, as compared to how much we devote to people who need us in special ways. I grew up with pets all around me, and they enriched my childhood. The Bauer family pets taught my siblings and me to open our eyes and see the wonder, mystery and goodness of nature. Pets also taught us that the living creatures we call people are also precious, and need our tenderness, too.

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