

“COMPANION ANIMALS” – US OR THEM?

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Anyone who has ever been owned by an animal knows that the true “companion animal” in the relationship is us. For so long humans have taken such an egocentric view of animals that we have assumed that we “own” them, but nothing could be further from the truth. And it is worth noting that not only do they “own” us and “adopt” us, they actually train us.

I am an attorney with an undergraduate degree in Wildlife Biology. I have spent much of my life in the company of animals - both domestic and wild. The older I get, the more ashamed I am at how grossly I (and many others) have underestimated animals.

I believe that the first time this dawned on me was while I was a teenager, still living at home. Every night during dinner, our 2 large dogs (Herb and Murray) would start wrestling and growling so fiercely that dinner conversation was drowned out. In addition, their physical altercation (albeit playful) caused such turbulence of the dining room table that eating was impossible as well. The ritual began as soon as we sat down and began our dinner. The ruckus under the table would commence and my father would immediately stand up, walk to the door and let both dogs out. This went on so long that it was habit and barely noticed after a while.

However, one night I happened to notice that after a few moments of rough-housing, Herb and Murray stopped their commotion in unison and casually trotted over to the door to wait for my father to let them out, which he did, automatically, without giving it a thought. At that moment, it hit me that Herb and Murray had trained my father to let them out at every dinner time. I pointed that fact out to my family and they thought it was just a fluke, and promptly dismissed the idea.

I, of course, felt very smug and superior to other people once I realized the phenomenon of animals training people. However, I admit that, despite being a wildlife biologist, I assumed this phenomenon was limited to domestic animals. However, about 25 years ago, I mounted a bird feeder with a suction cup on a window of my house. As it happened, the window was in the kitchen. One day, as I was doing the dishes, I heard a little tapping sound from the window. When I looked out I saw a little bird standing *on top* of the feeder, looking inside and tapping. Then I noticed that the feeder was empty. The thought occurred to me that the little bird was signaling me to fill the empty feeder but I dismissed that thought immediately as ridiculous.

Well, it wasn't. That scenario was repeated whenever the feeder was empty, which was frequently since it was a small feeder. That little bird taught me how deliberate, and calculated animal behavior can be.

Since then I have observed animals training people more times than I can remember. In fact, once one begins to be more attuned to their behavior, it can be witnessed routinely. It

therefore struck me as funny when I was sitting in a conference on animal law and started to really think about the new, politically correct term for pets – “companion animals.” I almost burst out laughing because, as a practical matter, one has to wonder who “domesticated” whom, and who is the “companion animal.” From my experience (and I am “pushing” 60) I would have to say that they “domesticated” us and that we serve as their “companion animals.”