

# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

## Mornings With Jacques

by Daniel Pinkwater

Unless you're a shepherd or maybe an Inuit musher, it's a safe assumption that if you live with a dog it is because you derive pleasure from doing so. We enjoy living with dogs for a variety of reasons. Unconditional love gets cited a lot, companionship, a surrogate child, a fellow participant in certain sports. What I like about dogs is their capacity to communicate, and be communicated with—a trans-species conversation.

Jacques was a pound puppy we did not need. He was your typical shelter shepherd, yellowish tan, medium-sized, on the skinny side, hyperactive, noisy, and completely untrained. But there was something about him, the look in his eye—once I saw him, I knew he was going to wind up living with us, and there was nothing rational about this. It was not even a decision—it was a recognition of fact. When I took him out on the leash for a pre-adoption get-acquainted walk, his feet hardly touched the ground. He was crazy-wild with joy at being out of his cage.

He was going to need plenty of training—and that was all right with me. I know how to train dogs. He came home on July 14th, Bastille Day, hence his name. Friends who saw him that day refused to believe he was the same dog when they visited again at the end of the summer. He had filled out, developed an impressive athletic physique, become calm, quit bouncing off the ceiling. Where he had seemed to be made of pipe cleaners, and in a state of continual frenzy, he was now handsome, quiet and

self-contained. One could see his lineage, German shepherd and Akita—he bore himself with dignity.

Key to Jacques' rehabilitation and training was a daily morning walk of an hour or so. On these walks I taught him many things—I also learned. And I taught him to fear squirrels.

*“Shh, look out. It's a squirrel. Don't let him see us.”*

At first he was inclined to chase them. Instead of getting into an argument with him, I counted on his canine tendency to read my emotions, and fell back on the first chapter, which was all I had read, of a book about method acting. I would tighten up on the leash, take baby tip-toe steps, and whisper to Jacques, “Shh, look out. It's a squirrel. Don't let him see us.”

Jacques shot me a look, “What? Are they dangerous?”

“Are you kidding? Squirrels are lethal.” I all but held my breath as we sneaked past some squirrel who was ready to flee, but not before enjoying the spectacle of a man and dog cringing as they walked by.

It wasn't long before Jacques was on the constant lookout for squirrels. He would crowd against my leg, and whimper, “Boss! It's a squirrel. Don't let him see us!” Together we would sneak our sneakiest sneaky walk, and get out of the squirrel's range without being horribly mauled.

I can't say for sure that Jacques actually became afraid of squirrels. Certainly he did not hesitate to chase them up trees in

the yard at home. It may be he thought I was afraid of them and humored me. Or maybe he considered the whole thing a crazy charade, and played along because he found it funny.

Over the years, we took that same walk along the bluffs above the Hudson, at the Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site, approximately 4,000 times. We saw all manner of things one could expect to encounter on such rambles—from deer, to pileated woodpeckers, to the occasional bald eagle. We enjoyed all kinds of weather, the changing seasons, and one another's company.

And never once were we torn to bits by an enraged squirrel.

First-time *Conservationist* contributor and children's book author extraordinaire **Daniel Pinkwater** lives with his wife Jill on a farm in the Hudson Valley. He promises to contribute another essay when, in his words, “...the complaints stop.”



Kathy McLaughlin