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Our Unknown Family

True Stories about Animals and Humans

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Wahre Geschichten von Tieren und Menschen)

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The Blackbird (pp. 13-15)

As told by Erika Orth, Munich

It was late summer. I had just come back from the shops when I saw several children in our yard, all abuzz.

I said: 'What's going on?'

'We've found a little bird.'

So, I said: 'I'll take it with me then.' I didn't know what they'd done to it. You never know - when five or six children get together ...

It turned out to be a young blackbird. Tiny. I guess it must have been fourteen days old at the most. I took it upstairs with me - I live on the third floor - and put a basket on the sideboard in the kitchen and placed some newspaper inside. And that's where it always sat, and I fed it. Mostly small mush balls made of mince, milk, bread and bit of egg yolk; whatever I had in the house. I placed the food on the end of a matchstick ...

With little birds like that, you can only hope that it's the right thing to do. You never know if they're going to make it. But the blackbird seemed to be healthy and quickly got used to life in the flat. After a few days it would sit on my shoulder every night while I watched television or slip under the collar of my blouse and fall asleep. So sweet.

Over time it grew much bigger, and I took it to work with me in a shoe box (I hadn't yet retired at that point). I would take it out with me at lunchtime and sit it on a rock so that it learned to fly. A bit higher each time. We practised for quite a long time. And it learned nice and slowly. Out of the basket, to the sideboard, down to the floor ... After a while it only flew up to eat. The rest of the time it marched

up and down the flat. I also had a Siamese and a Boxer at the time. It would hang out with them all the time. The three of them were always together.

After about six months it was almost fully grown. I let it out on the balcony more and more often, fed it outside and told it: 'When you're ready to fly by yourself, I want to let you go,' because it's not good to keep a wild bird in a flat.

It sometimes flew onto the balcony railing, but quickly came straight back in. But then one day it was gone. I was terrified because I thought: 'My goodness, what's become of it?' When you've had an animal for a long period of time, you grow attached to it.

It came back a few more times. But after that it probably had more important things to do. I suppose it had chicks; it was a female after all. But it was a difficult time for me. When I stood on the balcony and saw a blackbird, I would stretch out my arm - this had always been our signal - and call: 'Sweetie!'

I was still calling after two years. Until one day in late summer, I saw a blackbird on the roof across the way. 'Sweetie, come - come!' And suddenly the bird left the roof and flew straight over to my hand! I cried. It came straight into the flat. It was as if it had never been away. I found the old basket and placed it on the sideboard. It had a rest in there for a while. That evening I said to my husband: 'If someone offered me a diamond bracelet in exchange for this moment, I would tell them they could keep it.'

The balcony door was always open at night, even when it was cold. I didn't know whether the bird had chicks somewhere. But when I got up in the mornings - and this was how things stayed for the rest of the day - it would be sitting with the dog and the cat under the table in the living room. That was the first place that caught the sun in the mornings. It was just a small patch, but it was warm. And that's where the three of them sat. Just like old times.

It stayed another two weeks and then flew off. But for years, when I fed the blackbirds in front of the garage, there was a certain blackbird. Female blackbirds all look the same, it's true. But there was one particular blackbird, one that was always the first to arrive when I came around the corner with the food. And this blackbird came until it was old and grey - female blackbirds get greyer with age, so I could recognise it. This went on for years, years and years. It never flew onto my arm again - but it always looked at me.

Sliding Games (pp. 16-21)

As told by Roland Gockel, Berlin

As a young man in the 1970s, I had a sort of dream vision: I developed a strange interest in marine mammals. Which is why I later travelled all around the world looking for the chance to interact with them - especially whales. I was really keen.

At the age of twenty-three - this was in 1986 - I finally met a whale researcher in the South Pacific, an Australian, who promised to take me along for one day. However, a storm came on, it didn't work out, the date of my departure grew closer - and then on the last possible day he finally took me along. It was the first day that he had not seen *any* whales! Luckily, he had a hydrophone - an underwater

microphone - so that I could at least hear the whales. Wonderful humpback whale song.

I made several more trips after that. But somehow it was always jinxed. They were there, I should have seen them, but it seemed to me that the more I tried to force it, the less likely it was to happen. At some point I gave up and just wanted to enjoy my travels. And that was the magical turning point. Because then they suddenly kept appearing. At least that was how it seemed. Over the next few years, I had several encounters. The first was during a whale-watching tour off the coast of San Francisco - the Americans, along with the Australians, were the first to organise such boat tours - then underwater near the Azores and finally several times, just like that, as a gift, unplanned.

When I was thirty-six, I took a trip to Patagonia. As a journalist, I had a special permit to be allowed in the water in a nature reserve and wanted to do some filming. However, this was anything but straightforward. The water is rich in plankton, so visibility is not good, just the occasional silhouette.

It was again on my last day there. I made an attempt to get a sighting of a right whale with its calf, but I didn't really believe I would be successful. It was my final attempt. I entered the water in my wet suit and snorkelling equipment. Whale mother and calf were about thirty metres away, playing with each other. The game went like this: the calf - just below the surface - swam towards its mother, slipped onto her back, and the mother then raised herself out of the water, turning her back into a water slide and the calf slid down towards her tail fin.

This calf - which was about seven metres long - was clearly enjoying the game. But suddenly it moved away from its mother and came towards me, to see what sort of a strange creature I was. It could only have been about four months old and had probably never seen a diver before. Of course, I tried to keep my distance and just observe. The calf was very unusual. Completely white with black dots all over. And so, it swam towards me, at a slow pace for a whale - at a *very fast* pace for a human - and positioned itself so that I suddenly found myself between mother and child. I felt very uncomfortable. My first thought was: 'Oh dear! This is exactly what you shouldn't do!' There are a couple of golden rules for animal filmmakers: for example, you should never get between animal mother and child, because this causes them both a lot of stress. It's a sensitive situation. The mother's protective instinct is strong. And in the case of an 18-metre long right whale, this can backfire.

I then realised that the whale baby wanted to play the same game with me as it had been doing with its mother. It wanted to somehow get on top of me and then slide down my back but sensed from my reaction - I quickly swam away - that the proportions were all wrong, and initially withdrew.

The next time it swam over very carefully and slowly. It had completely changed its tempo and the whole way it approached me. And so, I in turn became slower and more careful. We got closer and closer, paused next to each other for a long time, and then I finally dared to touch its pectoral fin. It let me. And our eyes were really close too. Interestingly, the feeling of closeness is completely different in the water from how it is on land. Many creatures get much closer to each other than they do on land. This is probably down to the fact that most creatures in the water don't have arms to touch or grip with. This seems to have an impact on their personal space around them. It is much smaller.

About thirty centimetres separated me and the whale baby.

And that was really lovely: the whale baby opened and closed its eyes several times, which to me, as I could only see one of its eyes because of the sheer size of its body, looked as though it was winking at me. Finally, it dived down, and I

remained on the surface. And then it came back up! Right underneath me! But slowly. And I stayed. And it gently lifted me - on its back - out of the water. I lay on its back, my heart beating furiously. And then it let me slide down; turning the game around of its own accord. I was absolutely fascinated by the fact that this small young animal was playing this game, which it had just played with its mother, with a species that was completely alien to it.

And what is more, my role was completely different from how it usually was. I was much smaller. I didn't know how skilful - or otherwise - this animal might be. I'm not on the menu for right whales, but still you're entrusting yourself to quite a sizeable animal at that moment. I'm a snail in the water compared to such a marine mammal like this. I can't withdraw quickly enough. There isn't *anywhere* to withdraw to. This means it's an act of surrender. The same feeling as during a parachute jump - including letting go, committing and an incredible leap of faith into the animal's social sensibility. But I have to say: the moment I realised that all was well, that this seven-metre whale baby was treating me carefully - like we would if we were holding a guinea pig - I thought it was simply wonderful. To experience this care! This sensitivity for the well-being of a creature from a different species. I was thrilled.

It is in such moments like this that you realise how incredibly devaluating a term like 'wilderness' or 'wild' is in the way it's used in our culture. Almost everything that I ever experienced in relation to the behaviour of animals made sense. When you take the time to interpret, to really get to know a wild animal, this view, in which we equate 'wild' with 'unpredictable', simply disappears. Essentially, you just have to observe. A sense, a cultivated perception, develops. And this results in mindful contact. Behaviour patterns are actually composed of behaviour fragments strung together: the posture changes, there are noises that may or may not be audible; in land animals, the ears might twitch in a certain way. There is always a *chain of behaviour*. Each step corresponds to the previously received signals and follows on from those. Judged by the human sense of time, this can happen very slowly or incredibly fast. We need to be aware that socially active animals have different moods depending on the day. They have times when they are socially interested; they have times when they're hungry; and they have times when they want to be left in peace, by their kind or by other species. This is no different from us humans.

This also fitted with the whale mother's behaviour in Patagonia. I had completely forgotten about her in my excitement. At some point I remembered: 'Oh, where is she?' I turned around and saw this huge black wall behind me. But it was completely calm. I felt no fear. She was just there, like a wall. If I had panicked her calf, she would have been right there. But now I had the impression that she realised the calf was having fun and she was actually quite happy to have a short break.

It wasn't more than fifteen minutes. But it seemed like an age to me. Especially the time when the calf and I played this sliding game. Later, in the recordings, I was able to see that it only lasted a minute or so. But for me, this minute stretched out, almost magically. In my youth, I could never have dreamed of having such an experience. I simply wanted to see an animal like that in real life. But having that special contact ...! Afterwards I thought: 'If that is possible, then everything else in life will work out too.' Especially in the case of encounters with animals.

Mr Three Legs (pp. 75-79)

*As told by Marie Mannschatz from Hamburg
Retold by the author*

The story is set in Switzerland in the Bernese Oberland region above a small village high up in the mountains. A friend of mine - her name is Carla - has a house there, set slightly above the village on a slope from where you can see far out across the valley. A very nice, small, multi-storey house from the 1950s. The Swiss call it a 'chalet'.

The wilderness begins more or less next to the house. There is forest, which is not suitable for hiking as it's very steep. This is the reason why it's so quiet up there, apart from the many animals that roam around. There is just high snow there in winter, and Carla struggles to even to make it down into the village to pick up supplies.

On the edge of the property - maybe fifteen metres from the house, so still in view - there is a compost heap. One winter, about eight or nine years ago, Carla noticed that an animal kept sneaking up there to find something to eat. Every single day. As far as I remember, she only noticed it because she found traces of blood in the snow. At some point she realised that it was a cat, and this cat was injured. It couldn't use one of her hind legs because it had an open wound there. Perhaps it had been caught in a trap or had been attacked by another animal; and healing is slower in winter.

Carla is quite a gruff elderly Swiss lady - and a total cat-lover. At the time, she had three cats living in her house - and now kept an eye out for the injured cat. But this cat was very shy because it was wild.

So, Carla tried to get it to come closer to the house and make it less shy by feeding it - so that it didn't immediately run away when it saw her. This improved over time. Carla finally noticed that the wound was severe and decided: 'I need to take her to the vet. This can't go on. It's just not healing.'

So, she threw a blanket over the cat and got it down to the vet in the village, who had to carry out a big operation and amputate the lower half of its hind leg. So, the cat now only had three legs and had difficulty walking. I seem to remember that it was called 'Mr Three Legs'. All her cats have funny names.

The operation cost one thousand Swiss francs. And Carla paid these one thousand Swiss francs. Not only that; because it had been such a major operation, the vet told her to keep the cat in one room at first so that it couldn't run away. And that she had to give it regular doses of antibiotics and generally take care of it.

But the only place that Carla could do that was in her bedroom. From then on, the two of them sat together night after night. The cat couldn't have the run of the rest of the house because of the other cats.

The next three weeks were difficult - for both of them. A real challenge. The cat was very restless and jumpy. But over time, it got used to Carla and when this difficult period was over, it didn't want to run away anymore. It was given its own food bowl, just like the other cats, and returned every day, staying near the house and became more and more Carla's cat.

Of course, the devotion that Carla showed got around. The next time I went to visit - I go there regularly - the people in the village told me: 'Carla has spent so much money on getting a wild cat healed'; they respected her for it.

And it was clear that she hadn't done it because this was a particularly pretty cat. Just a plain tabby cat with a small white bib, but otherwise a slightly tubby-looking wild thing. Really not very pretty. No one would think: 'Oh, how sweet'.

I had to give all this background information because of the rest of the story: Carla regularly flies to Australia for long periods of time. Four, six weeks. Sometimes two months. But during her absence, the cats can come in and out. They have a cat flap - and people from the village come every day to take care of them and put their food out.

This had all happened as usual. Carla had been in Australia, the people from the village had fed the cats - and two months later I came back with her to the house to spend a few days there. It was probably early evening, as it was growing dark.

We enter the house - Carla has a wonderful, large sitting room with a huge panoramic window, where you can look out across the valley - and the moment the cat, the former wild cat, catches sight of Carla, it goes completely mad. It screams, howls and jumps so high on its three legs - you just can't imagine. It actually catapulted itself into the air! I couldn't believe it. How did it do it? How can a cat do that? It jumped right up to chest height. In huge leaps. It was almost like in something from a cartoon. Where did it get the bounce from! And at the same time, it made really loud noises - noises I had never before heard a cat make before - and kept jumping up at Carla, circling around her, completely beside itself. It behaved like you might expect a dog to behave. But for a cat this was highly unusual, showing extreme joy. I used to have cats myself and know a lot of people who have them, but I have never seen a cat be so happy and go completely wild.

This went on for about two hours - constantly - and it kept uttering these howls of pleasure. Almost like American Indian whoops of joy. All that was missing was it starting to speak. At this point it would hardly have surprised me if the cat had started telling us how things had been during the last two months and how much it had missed Carla.

At some point we went to bed and naturally left the cat downstairs as it was disruptive with all these loud noises. But what impressed me the most was the fact that it made noises for the entire night - you couldn't say it was howling; it wasn't howling any more - it was noises that I would never associate with a cat. They were so unusual. You just realised: it is completely and utterly delighted - and cannot contain itself.

It took another twenty-four hours - the following day - until the cat understood: 'She's back. I can calm down now.' And that was the essence of the story for me: to see this extreme joy and connection that the cat had; experiencing the innate being of this animal in that living room. It was almost primitive: for me, it blurred the boundary between humans and animals.

But if you were to talk to Carla, she would probably tell the story in a couple of sentences. Of course, we talked about it afterwards, and I got the sense that she was downplaying it a bit, as if it hadn't meant that much to her. I, on the other hand, was completely blown away by the experience! And she just accepted it with composure, almost along the lines of: 'Well, I suppose the cat was quite pleased.'