

## Pondtales Om Ben

by Ben Abel & Eveline Ferretti

Benedict Anderson in Memoriam

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For over years, Ben Anderson's home in the United States was an old farmhouse on a few acres in Freeville, NY, about 12 miles east of Cornell's campus. There, for two of those four decades, Ben was our neighbor and our dear friend. Our two sons, teen-agers now, knew Ben Anderson as Om Ben—a large, round, white-haired, exquisitely quirky, and profoundly kind figure in their lives; he was for them the grandfather at the dinner table, unsparingly observant, prone to kooky questions and puzzling (and in their opinion no doubt, tedious) intellectual riddles, decidedly un-hip in his relationship to the trappings of American teenage modernity, yet always fantastically playful, always eager to spar with deliciously low-brow jokes and fake boxing maneuvers, and often surprisingly given to defending their youthful perspective against the interventions of dismayed parents who hoped to curb some of the breathtaking excesses of teenage self-centredness.

For as long as we lived with him as a family, Ben spent only part of the year—the part that extended from warm summer into colorful fall—in Freeville. Yet the slow languor of countless summer and early fall evenings afforded us the opportunity of getting to know him from many angles. And one of the most revealing and precious of these was his love of the animals around his Freeville home. The wooded hills and wetlands of Pleasant Hollow harbor an abundance of wildlife. Ben was comfortable, even enthusiastic about most of it, but three particular animals stand out as Ben's favorites in this landscape. They were creatures he would look for especially eagerly each time he returned to upstate NY in late spring. And really they say a great deal about the Ben we knew and loved.

The first was the blue heron. A frequent, silent visitor to the marshy pond on the downhill side of Ben's back yard during the summer months, the heron was much loved by Ben for its somewhat grouchy look, but also for its remarkable ability to stand stock still, head bent over the pond's edge, for what seemed like hours. Of course, we know that herons behave this way because they have perfected the strategy of waiting patiently for an edible something to present itself, and ever so skillfully snapping it up. But from Ben's own perch on his small 2nd floor porch, it was easy to imagine that long-legged visitor on the far side of the sagging dock as a being who had perfected the art of losing himself deeply in thought, waiting for that one breakthrough insight that made all that stillness, all that thinking, all that separation from cheap distractions, very, very worthwhile.

The second animal that Ben had particular fondness for during his summers at home was a more elusive character, presenting himself only occasionally after sunlight had faded from the evening sky, and then only by call. Nothing would put Ben in a better mood for the evening than the hoot of the barred owl making itself heard from the tall pines by the back deck. We could never see

that owl of course. But when he called, the dinner conversation would come to a sudden stop, and all would peer rapturously up into the branches high above, each of us envisioning the look of that wide-eyed bird, watchfully peering around and over, scanning the night above and below for what is and what moves.

Last but by no means least of the natives that Ben most loved in the forest-field-wetland habitat around his home was the dandy skunk. The two places of skunk hibernation that we discovered around Ben's house over the years ensured a frequent number of visits from these creatures over the spring, summer and fall months. Ben was absolutely delighted when they came to call and was ready to defend their reputation fiercely, even as the rest of us proved far more skeptical and far less able to shake off our nervous unease in their presence. No doubt the skunk's magnificent attire—that gorgeous white mane against that jet black base—explained at least some of Ben's admiration. Ultimately, however, it is also easy to believe that what drew Ben most to these handsome fellows was their strategy in face of untoward developments: Their ability to deploy a non-lethal yet most effective strategy to persuade any oncoming menace to stop, re-evaluate the sense of its attack, and more likely than not, back off.

The blue heron, the barred owl, the skunk—all animals native to the Finger Lakes, and thanks to the years that we were able to spend with our peripatetic Om Ben, ones that will always remind us of him, of some of the values he held most dear, and of some of the most important lessons he gave us, both in word and by virtue of how he led his own life: The importance of taking the time to stop and think, of looking up and around, and, yes, when the situation calls for it, of having the courage and presence of mind to make a bit of a stink.