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HOME & REAL ESTATE



Some Place Like Home *Dave Milano*

What a Quack

The first time ducklings visited the house (carried here in wicker baskets by sunny, blonde little girls) we watched them, played with them, and somehow resisted keeping one. The second time, we caved.

Daughter Gina was an easy sell from day one of course; wife Mary was not far behind; son Patrick adopted his usual stance of diplomatic neutrality. I was the only holdout. But as the impossibly appealing balls of green fluff scampered across the kitchen floor, splashed into and out of their water basins, and then exhausted, slept in our laps, my resistance faded and I agreed, albeit with mild reluctance, to become a duck household. I set only one condition: our duck would come home in the opposite way most animals did. Dad would own it; Daughter would take care of it. So arrived Bob.

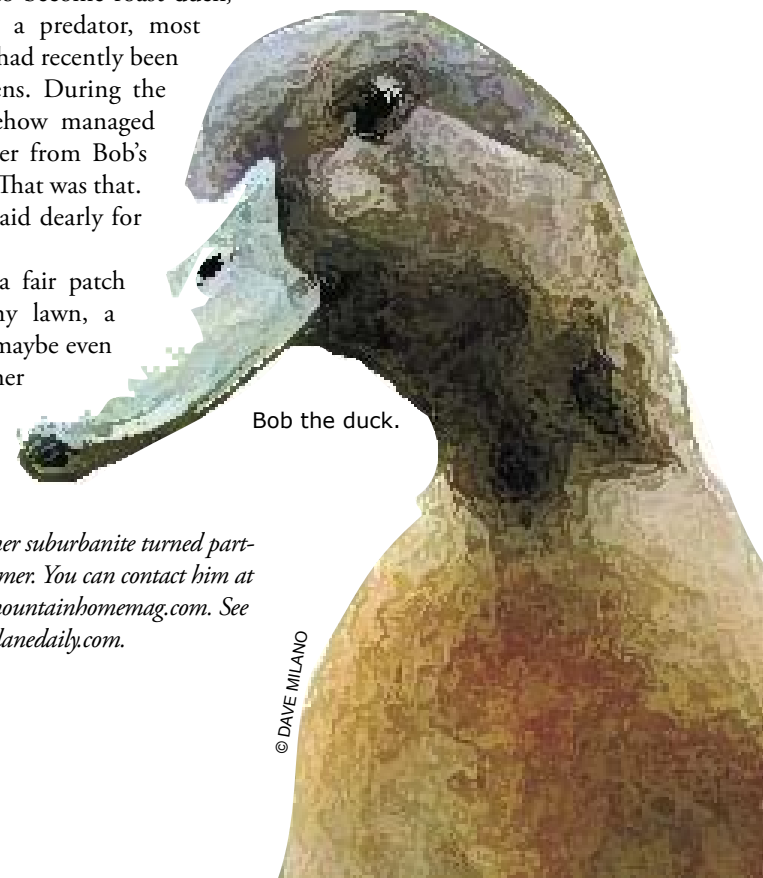
At first, baby Bob spent a lot of time in very close contact with humans. Hand feeding was the norm, as were periodic play sessions and daily walks to the pond—humans in the lead, Bob frantically tearing along in close pursuit. Amazingly, daughter Gina kept her end of the bargain and dutifully (mostly) managed Bob's needs, including moving our barely portable duck pen daily onto fresh grass, supervising swimming and mucking-about sessions in the pond, and providing careful developmental monitoring.

That last was serious business because sexing ducklings, it turns out, is a tricky business. I won't go into detail here except to say that experts are required for the job, unless one wants to risk injuring the bird. We are not experts, so we lived with a looming question: Was Bob a drake or a hen? This was no mere rhetorical puzzler for, translated into plain reality, the question really was this: Would we later be enjoying duck eggs, or duck dinner?

Bob The Egg Producer was the family's consensus hope, but alas, as the little duck grew and matured, the telltale signs of a drake began to appear. The first and most suggestive was an upward curl of the tail feathers. Other signs of masculinity appeared as well. At every opportunity Bob suddenly wanted to lead rather than follow. And he was inclined to aggression, especially toward feet, snapping wildly at inattentive bare toes. (His determination in this was audacious—Bob clearly believed that with just a little time he could nibble the opposition completely to death. Eventually, we came to agree with him.) In relatively short order, Bob transformed himself from a cute companion into an entirely pugnacious and absolutely fearless warrior. Every audience—dog, chicken, human, whatever—was treated to a totally confident, incautious, and merciless attack. Sadly, plans were made for the oven.

Fate, however, was not about to allow the scrappy duck into our kitchen again. A day before he was to become roast duck, Bob was taken by a predator, most likely a bobcat that had recently been deviling our chickens. During the night the cat somehow managed to rip a small corner from Bob's pen and gain entry. That was that. The cat, I'm sure, paid dearly for his meal.

Bob left behind a fair patch of extremely healthy lawn, a doleful family, and maybe even an opening for another duck—a hen.



Bob the duck.

Dave Milano is a former suburbanite turned part-time Tioga County farmer. You can contact him at someplacelikehome@mountainhomemag.com. See his blog at www.mundanedaily.com.

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