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SHORTGRASS

Stinging scorpions moved inside from the dry weather ahead of the other creatures around the ranch house. Big males slithered up the clay drain pipes, through the grease traps, and burst into daylight in the sinks and lavatories.

Before their vision adjusted to the glare of the overhead lights, I dropped four in a row using a 10-inch offset-handled aluminum pot for a bludgeon. Porcelain chips cut into the window frame above the kitchen sink; the last one to fall swung his stinger around to self-eliminate and flipped the plunger on the sink strainer. I had to hold him down with a potato masher until he choked to death.

By mid-August, the migration changed. Cottontail rabbits looked like the only wild or domestic animals who were going to stick out the drouth with me. The black mother cat was the first to go. She went down in her arches from crouching so deep to spring onto baby bobwhite quail and had to be removed.

Next the house covey of blue quail kept foraging farther and farther away from the house until they started watering at the North Mill. And the raccoon family and a gray fox squirrel and an old ladder-back woodpecker, all longtime residents, disappeared after they saw how measely the pecan crop was headed.

The cat leaving hurt the most. Cats give an outfit a homey feeling, especially out on a ranch where they have a 300 or 400 acre horse trap to use for a hideout and hunting ground. I became mighty attached to seeing her slip in about dark to water at the barn. Her given name was "Ruthie." In summer, after she had eaten her fill of baby quail, the sheen of her black hair reflected in the twilight like a magician's cape.

The family has always been able to afford all the cats we wanted. At the Old Ranch, my sister kept a full herd of eight toms to every 16 females. The cats took up so much space, the milk cow stalls and the chicken house and the saddle shed became as flavorful as a city pound.

Luckily, the ranch furnished two good Jersey milk cows to supplement the kitties, or she'd have missed the surplus ratings awarded cat owners by the U.S. Department of Agriculture census of 1970 and '71.

At peak production, she enrolled in an upstate New York university with the intention of going into veterinary medicine to doctor her cats and the Boss's polo ponies, which in both cases were in bad need of a subsidized medical plan. But by mid-semester in the winter of '73, she discovered how much fun dances and side trips to Florida were; the cats went wild on the big draw in front of the ranch house, and the polo ponies remained under the care of a horse and mule specialist

totally unrelated to the family.

The main reason the rabbits like the yard is because of the green grass where the dishwater is thrown out the back door. In the past 10 years, I've never missed a nap or lost an hour's sleep because my rabbits were howling at the moon or throwing a fit from stomach worms.

Sure, old Ruthie was a big comfort to see now and then running for cover across the road, but as much as a bachelor stays on the go, he needs a pet easy to take care of, like my cottontail rabbits...

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