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Yard Time With The Animals

By Joseph Dole

“Animals.” For people in prison, that single word can evoke powerful emotions. As an adjective it is often used to dehumanize us. The vast majority of people in society will assume you are referring to “criminals” when you talk about the “animals” in prisons. It is often society’s favored derogatory term to employ against us. Rarely are we considered people anymore.

The word “animals” can also spark all types of positive memories and countless conversations in here. The childhood pets, horseback riding, visiting a farm. Those who haven’t been to prison may be surprised to learn that there are often actual animals in here as well. Sometimes we encounter them in the cell houses, but more often than not it’s while we are on the “yard.”

For some, the encounters can be frightening. For others it is pure joy. For everyone though, it seems to help connect us to the rest of the planet in the face of society trying to erase us from it.

When I think of “yards,” I no longer conjure up images of manicured lawns with sprinklers being annoyed by happy children. Now I think of two things, concrete and animals. This may seem incongruous, but let me explain. The majority of my “yard time” over the past 16 years has been spent in a concrete box. Nevertheless, most of my interactions with wildlife during those years have occurred on the yards of various Illinois maximum- and supermaximum – security prisons.

- Menard -

After processing into the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) at the Joliet Correctional Center (which was shuttered shortly thereafter and had a starring role in the TV show “Prison Break”), I began my perpetual prison bit at Menard Correctional Center (Menard). At that time (2000-2002), I was housed in East House, and we received recreation, or “rec,” three times per week. We were allowed access to the gym once and a large yard twice. Each rec lasted about two to three hours, and the yard could accommodate hundreds of men.

All things considered, Menard’s yard wasn’t bad. It had a quarter-mile track encircling a field of grass sufficient for both volleyball and softball games. Once in a while, we would even play mini soccer. There were also basketball and handball courts, which I never used. The weight pile was your usual rusted affair, which I used a lot in any type of weather.

There's a common misconception that people who lift weights in prison do so to bulk up and appear more intimidating. While this may be true for a few, I believe most guys do it for the same reason that I do – to relieve stress, maintain my health, and quickly burn a lot of calories, which we over-consume by stress-eating junk food from the commissary.

That entire yard in Menard abuts a rock bluff due to the fact that the prison basically sits in an old rock quarry looking out on the Mississippi River. From the surrounding woods, deer would occasionally emerge to look down on us. I mean this literally, but often I would wonder if they were joining society and it were true figuratively as well. Seeing the deer always reminded me of wandering the woods as a kid with my grandfather. Whenever we would see deer, he would mentally mark the spot intending to set up a blind for when deer season came around.

What I enjoyed most about the yard in Menard was that in the summer I could always find myself a pet. Garter snakes, frogs, and turtles would often break into the prison grounds. Cats and raccoons roamed the grounds as well, but you could hardly hide one in your cell. At night, I could look out the window and see more than a dozen raccoons hanging out on the roof of the storage building, planning their assault on the chowhall dumpsters.

Once I smuggled a baby turtle the size of a quarter back to my cell. Its shell was so dark green it was nearly black. Its legs were mottled yellow and black with soft needle-point claws. I built a small aquarium out of Styrofoam trays and cellophane. Against the rules, I know, but with more than two natural-life sentences to serve for something I didn't do, the only way you could have gotten me to follow most rules would have been to pay me. When guards would walk the gallery I would push the aquarium out of sight under the bunk. During shakedowns I'd cuff the turtle in my hand as I was handcuffed. Confused guards would destroy the empty aquarium and I'd have to build another.

Everyone who saw my little turtle coveted it. My neighbors would often ask me to let them play with it for the day, and everyone would bring back anything they thought it might like to eat.

For an entire month, the gallery worker nagged me incessantly to give it to him. By the time I gave in, it had grown to the size of a silver dollar. I was sad to see it go, but I figured I could still see it daily as I went to chow. I knew it was safer with him. The guards would be less likely to take it from their worker.

I don't know what ever happened to my little turtle. (Hopefully it didn't end up as turtle stew). Nor have I seen another one thereafter. Soon after giving up custody of it, I was transferred to Tamms Supermax Prison (Tamms) where I wouldn't touch a blade of grass for my entire stay.

- Tamms -

I spent the next decade of my life at Tamms (2002-2012), which would later be rechristened Tamms Correctional Center as a public relations stunt. Tamms' "yards" were a misnomer if ever there was one. Like every cell, every yard was an isolation chamber. No more than a single person was locked in each at a time. The yards each consisted of a concrete slab for a floor the size of a tight-fit one-car garage. More solid concrete slabs, each about fifteen feet tall and eight inches thick made up the walls. The roof was one-half corrugated steel and one-half chain-link fencing.

The only fixtures were a flood light, a video camera, and a solid red steel door with an emergency call button. The latter, if pressed, was habitually ignored by the guards. If answered, it was usually to inform the occupant that he would be written a disciplinary ticket if he pressed it again. There was no access to water or a washroom, and pretty much nothing to do other than calisthenics.

Fortunately, like Menard and so many other prisons isolated from society, Tamms was surrounded by woods and wildlife. This would sometimes be a source of entertainment for us. Out of the dirt-fogged slices of a cell window, we would often see hawks, turkey-buzzards, deer, skunks, raccoons, and other wildlife.

After about a year of isolation, I began to feel remorseful about keeping my little turtle captive in Menard. As a child, I always had lots of pets. Some store-bought, but most snatched from the wild and caged out of childish love. I guess I was sort of conditioned to believe that being human gave me the right to cage other living beings. Maybe we all are, and that's why we call people who commit crimes "animals" – it makes it easier for use to cage them.

After a decade of isolation, I don't think I could ever put any living being in a cage again. Society likes to portray "prisoners" or "criminals"; as all starting out as deranged little children torturing animals. This is just one of many ways they dehumanize us to try and sooth the collective conscience over treating millions of people so inhumanely.

The reality is that most people in here have never intentionally harmed an animal (nonhuman animal that is). I know I haven't. I've always loved animals.

Often, when it rained, tree frogs would scale the wet cement walls to gain access to the Tamms yards. As soon as the sun dried the walls though, the frogs would find themselves imprisoned like us. Their repeated fruitless attempts to scale the wall, only to fall back down, depressingly reminded me of my repeated fruitless efforts to regain my own freedom though the courts.

The frogs were fun to play with, however. At first, they would try to hop away. After holding them for a few minutes, they would get used to me and seemingly lose their fear. Once that happened, I would sit them on my shoulder while I speed-walked laps around the yard. It would amuse me to see them placidly sitting atop my shoulder, bobbing up and down to the rhythm of my gait.

Before leaving the yard, I would gently loft them up so that they could grasp the chain-link half of the roof and escape. I'd often wonder whether they understood that I helped them get out. Were they grateful? Or were they ticked that I didn't help them sooner?

Besides frogs, small birds would also come into the yards. They would nest in the hollows created where the corrugated steel lay atop the concrete walls, and inside the steel boxes housing the security cameras. Other than exchanging trills and whistles, we rarely got to interact with them. Listening to their chirps and getting them to respond was one of our few connections to the free world. Seeing them fly away made us yearn to do the same.

On the other hand, while we enjoyed their music, their feces tormented us. The yards were their

litter boxes. It was like being locked in a pigeon coop, making the name “bird cage” apt. Designed and built for “jailbirds,” the yards were overrun by real birds. Guards refused to clean them and we were denied the implements and cleaning supplies to do so. Walls and floors were often covered in excrement, making leaning against a wall nearly impossible. Walking or running required scrubbing the soles of your shoes upon re-entering your cell. I used to have to smuggle sheets of paper to the yard to place on the ground so that I could do push-ups.

One of my best experiences at Tamms (“best” definitely being a relative term here as the place was pure psychological torture) involved those birds though. It occurred one spring morning when I was the first person on the yard. I walked out and noticed something dart up towards the chain-link roof. It was one of the mother birds flying to safety. She zipped through the chain-link and landed on top of the far wall. Once there, she began to scream bloody murder at me. I couldn’t figure out what her problem was, as they usually just flew away. Frowning, I turned back to watch through the little plexiglass window in the door as the guards deadbolted it. When I turned to begin my 500 laps, I stumbled upon three fledglings huddled in one of the corners.

I slowly approached the fat downy little brown balls and they scattered. One tried to take flight, but only managed to rise a mere three feet. It bee-lined into the opposite corner. We’ll call it Birdie #1. The second birdie, Birdie #2, took flighty little hops out of my reach. Birdie #3 simply waddled around in drunken little circles like a dying dreidel.

I picked up Birdie #3 and to my surprise, it didn’t struggle to escape. I opened my hand, but it didn’t jump away. It just looked at me, seemingly confident that I, one of society’s alleged boogeymen, would never hurt it. I slowly placed it on my shoulder. Throughout this process, the pitch and intensity of mama’s squalls continued to rise.

After placing Birdie #3 on my shoulder, I walked over to try and pick up Birdie #1, who seemed the strongest of the three. Birdie #1 was definitely not cooperative. This forced me to set Birdie #3 down in order to give chase.

When I finally caught Birdie #1, it struggled fiercely and joined mama in making a racket. Trying to calm it down, I cooed at it and carried it under the corrugated steel into the shade. From there, I tossed it up diagonally towards mama and the chain-link. It flapped for all it was worth, but didn’t make it more than eight feet up before coming to a hard-kissing-hover against the wall and slid to the ground. We repeated this dance a few more times. Finally, Birdie #1 began to gain something – strength, confidence, desperation, who knows? – allowing it to reach the chain-link. After a few bumbling attempts, it finally succeeded in squeezing through a hole mid-flight. Exhausted, it cautiously hopped across the chain-link to mama’s side.

Birdie #2 took a while longer. I first had to keep tossing it straight up in the air to get it used to flapping its wings. Then I repeated the same process I had used with Birdie #1 until it too was free of both the yard and its giant intruder.

I returned to Birdie #3, replaced it to its perch on my shoulder, and took a few laps around the yard. I’ll admit that I was very reluctant to help it escape. I was having a lot of fun and didn’t want it to end. I really wanted to bring it back to my cell to see if it would make friends with my pet mouse. (Several months earlier, a half-starved baby mouse slowly wandered into my cell. It didn’t even try to run, it just nuzzled under my leg as I sat cross-legged on the floor by my door.

After building it a home with an old sliding Q-Tip box, I spent several days nursing it back to health. I surmised that its mother probably got caught in a glue trap and the babies finally wandered out of the den in search of food. Months later it would still return to the Q-Tip box every couple of nights or so). Unfortunately, my conscience would no longer allow me to cage another living being, not to mention the incessant guilt trip mama was currently laying on me, so I wasn't going to incarcerate Birdie #3 with me.

I was starting to worry though. My yard time was quickly evaporating and Birdie #3 was much weaker than its siblings. I knew that if I couldn't help it escape soon, there was a good chance that a mentally ill inmate or guard would come out there after me and kill it. Birdie #3 would not be the first or even the second bird a guard at Tamms stomped on while checking the yards.

So, with mixed emotions, I put Birdie #3 into my open palm and started jogging laps, letting it spread its wings and flap them. After that I began dropping it from greater heights until it was hovering more than plummeting. With increasing trepidation and urgency, I started tossing it.

It was never as strong as the others. There was never a circuit flown around the yard. Nor did it ever stay aloft for long, even with what I imagined was familial encouragement. This one was taking too long. "Clank." I heard the deadbolt being thrown on the door. I hadn't even heard the guards come into the wing.

I now had just a few seconds to help Birdie #3 escape as the guards remotely opened the yard door ordering me back to my cell. Frantically, I tossed Birdie #3 straight at the chain-link trying to gently catch it each time it fell back down. I heard the lock – "pop, pop, pop" – and kept tossing. Three tosses, four, the damn bird would not squeeze through. "Dole, exit the yard!" I kept throwing. "Dole, this is a direct order, if you don't return to your cell immediately, you will be written a disciplinary ticket for disobeying a direct order!"

I ignored him, and kept trying. Finally, I tossed it up just right and Birdie #3 couldn't help but to sail through the chain-link to freedom. Exiting the yard I smiled. The lieutenant and major stood at the plexiglass door to the wing yelling, "We were just about to order the Tac Team to suit up, smart ass!"

That day was an aberration though. Most of my time spent on the various little concrete "yards" of Tamms were uneventful. No animals or birds to entertain me, I would run in depressing little circles packing down the bird feces, never able to gain much speed before having to turn another corner every two to five strides. Running on cement in cardboard-soled shoes was hell on my ankles, knees, and lower back.

The worst days were when a guard, either intentionally or inadvertently, would leave the floodlight on all night. I'd go out the next day to find myself accosted by hundreds of insects. Occasionally, I would encounter an interesting moth the size of my hand with bright orange and yellow velvety fur. This happened only a handful of times over a decade, but they were fascinating. I was always amazed that they fit through the chain-link, and will never forget how soft they were.

Those were the only interesting insects though. Mostly it was pure torture. Hundreds of mosquitoes, spiders, millipedes, you name it. A couple of times I went out to find myself trapped

with a hundred or more locusts, all screeching some high-pitched mating call. It was like being locked in a pen of squealing pigs being slaughtered for an hour or more.

- Pontiac -

When I finally escaped the torture of isolation in Tamms, I was transferred to Pontiac Correctional Center (Pontiac). I was housed on the old Death Row to go through the “step-down program” (2012) [1]. The yards were a complete culture shock.

For the initial 3-month phase of the program, we had to go to yard in the same cages used by people who were both mentally ill and classified as high security. The “yards” consisted of about 20 individual cages sitting atop a cement slab. Each cage measured about eight feet by fifteen feet. They were constructed of rust-red, pencil-thick, steel rods woven into an immobile mesh that left two-inch square openings throughout. Although you could see through the walls, these yards were much more confining than the cement tombs in Tamms. The roof was just eight feet above the ground and made of the same mesh. These boxes are commonly referred to as “dog runs” in prison parlance.

Though they possessed a pull-up bar, a novelty after Tamms, I was immediately advised by both staff and inmates, to not touch any part of the boxes with my bare skin. When I asked why, I was informed that there were a lot of “shit-slingers” who occupied the dog runs in the morning prior to us. Other guys promptly smuggled a pair of gloves to me.

My first trip to the yard verified these claims. The crevices were filled with dried excrement. Empty ziplock cocoa and coffee bags encrusted with it were crammed under the frames by the ground. Plastic bags that still held the remnants of bodily-fluid cocktails hung from the razor wire around the perimeter.

Instead of just cleaning my shoes after yard, I would come back to the cell and wash every article of clothing with contraband bleach. I would also scrub my entire body as if I were a surgeon with OCD.

A few months later, I graduated to the larger yards while in Phase 2. These were six larger yards located about twenty meters away from the dog runs. They felt like they were in an entirely different universe. Each was basically the size of half of a basketball court. Two even had basketball rims. Another had a weight bench and curl bar. All were just slabs of concrete surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire. Nevertheless, they felt incredibly spacious after the bird cages and dog runs.

Once, when I first arrived at Pontiac, I was being escorted to the cell house, clanking along in shackles, a waist chain, and handcuffs encased in a black, steel padlocked box. Nonetheless, despite the noise, a large rabbit jumped out of the hedges along the path, and passed right between my legs brushing the shackles. It wasn't even startled. It didn't jet off down the sidewalk out of fear like you'd expect. Instead, it just hopped along a foot ahead of us keeping pace with us for a good dozen steps before disappearing back into the hedge.

The yards for the second phase of the program were as close to petting zoos as I think I'll ever experience in prison. While the wildlife avoided the dog runs like the plague, a mere stone's

throw away I could hand-feed ducks, rabbits, and even squirrels right through the fence.

Once, while I was on the yard located at the end of North House running laps, an incredibly fat squirrel sat atop a horizontal pole that ran behind the fence in the shade of the building. It watched me run around and around. I had forgotten to bring food to feed the animals, but I had a few pieces of hard lemonade candy. When I finally tired, I walked over to the squirrel and pulled a couple out of my pocket. The first, I unwrapped and popped in my mouth. It watched transfixed and became visibly excited. I offered it one through the fence. It attempted to grab it, but couldn't quite reach, so it hopped down, squeezed under the fence, and nonchalantly sat on my foot. Smiling I slowly bent down and handed it one, thinking it would then scurry away with its treat. Instead, it just sat there on my foot and chipped away at the candy while staring up at me. I couldn't believe it. I grew up around squirrels and had never seen one so docile. Two days later, I saw the same squirrel sitting on a guard's knee eating elephant peanuts out of his hand.

- Stateville -

I left Pontiac a month or so later and arrived at Stateville Correctional Center (Stateville) (2012-Present). Here the "rec" schedule for the "quarter units" is insane. There are two little yards with small grass patches and basketball courts; a gym with decrepit, mostly inoperable, weight machines held together with twisted garbage bags and bed sheets; and a large yard called the "South Yard" with a meager, rusty weight pile, telephones with cords too short to allow people to sit or stand, and a quarter-mile track encircling a patch of grass large enough to play soccer on. We rotate among each yard/gym once every two weeks.

Stateville has neither ducks, nor rabbits, nor squirrels. There are no frogs or turtles. It does have at least one fox roaming the grounds though, and dozens, if not hundreds, of groundhogs. We feed the groundhogs daily when they aren't hibernating, which makes them incredibly fat. They know the pulse of the prison. They'll often ignore us as we walk to chow, but upon exiting, they will line up along the walks waiting for handouts. The administration constantly tries to eradicate them but is never completely successful. Most of us hope they never are, as they constitute our only pets.

My first time on the yard at Stateville was also my first time being on any yard with another human being in more than a decade. I was excited to finally play soccer again. Softball would have been more fun, but all of the equipment was now considered contraband and had been confiscated. Unfortunately, soccer was out of the question as well because we were relegated to a small yard. So I spent the time feeding the groundhogs through the fence.

When I finally made it to the South Yard a month later, I cobbled together a couple of teams to play some quick pick-up games of soccer on the lumpiest field imaginable. Running full speed while looking up field can easily mean a broken ankle when the ground drops out from beneath you. I took many painful, smiling tumbles that day.

Resting on a hill afterwards, an old-timer described how the yard was years ago. Hundreds, instead of dozens, of guys would be out there at once. He said there used to be a Lifers' Shack [2] where they sold pizzas, sodas, ice cream, and more. In its absence we now have to smuggle food and drinks out to the yards.

I asked him why the field is so uneven. He told me it used to be flat, but then one day a backhoe showed up while the prison was on lockdown and started digging up the field. Rumors started to spread that a swimming pool was being put in. It was short-lived though, once everyone saw the news reports. The backhoe was brought in to dig up the remains of a dead body. An inmate who was long-believed to have escaped in the 1980s had actually been murdered, butchered, and buried piecemeal out there. In the 1990s, another inmate finally spilled the beans. They never bothered to smooth out the field again.

When the old-timer left, I sat alone on a hill and began eating some cookies and granola bars with peanut butter. A groundhog popped out of a hole by my feet and startled the hell out of me. I don't know if it had heard the wrappers or smelled the food, but it clearly wanted in on my picnic. Not wanting to be rude, I gave it a granola bar. It delicately held it in its front paws and stood up like a Meerkat to eat it. When it finished, I gave it a packet of squeeze peanut butter, and watched as it chewed off the top and ate it like a Push-Pop. I quickly ran out of food, which did not please my picnic companion. It began climbing on my lap looking for more. All I could think to do to get it off my lap was to offer it some water from my bottle. I lured it as far away as I could by holding the bottle at arm's length. When it got off my lap for a drink, I stood up and walked off sacrificing my water bottle so I could escape

Some guys here are scared of the groundhogs. They are mostly guys from the inner city who view most animals as giant rats. The administration is terrified of the possible lawsuits if someone gets bit and sues. For most part though, both the inmates and guards enjoy having them here.

It's nice to be around other living beings that aren't constantly trying to demonize us.

Unlike society, the animals in here are not instinctually terrified of anyone labeled a "prisoner" or "criminal." They've been confined with thousands of us for years on end without being harmed. The animals are actually capable of judging us by who we are now to determine if we pose a threat. I find it ironic that the actual animals in here, which are defenseless against us, are able to make those individualized judgements, but "humanity," which distinguishes itself from the animal kingdom by our ability to reason, cannot (or at least won't).

We, "prisoners," are often called "animals" to dehumanize us and further ostracize us from society.

Whenever we complain about inhumane treatment, the arbitrary reply is always, "well, if you didn't act like animals, we wouldn't treat you like animals," a statement which misunderstands both incarcerated people and animals and how society treats both.

Maybe it is society that should start acting more like the animals in here: They should start making individualized assessments of who we are now and stop painting us all with a broad stigmatizing brush. Maybe then society will finally stop treating us inhumanely and stop keeping hundreds of thousands of people incarcerated for life, long past the time they cease posing any threat to society, practices which are both unjust and incompatible with keeping society safe and returning people to useful citizenship.

[1] In Stateville there is a giant cell house that was divided into four. These are now known as the "quarter units" – B House, C-House, D-House, and E-House

[2] Lifers Groups are now banned as an unauthorized organization, and with them went the Lifers' Shacks.



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Born in Saginaw, Michigan, Joseph Dole moved to Illinois when he was 8 years old. In 2000, at the age of 22, Mr. Dole was wrongly convicted of a gang-related double-murder and sentenced to life-in-prison. He continues to fight that conviction. Since incarcerated, Mr. Dole has authored two books, [A Costly American Hatred](#) and [Control Units and Supermaxes: A National Security Threat](#). In addition, his essays have appeared in numerous anthologies as well as Truthout, The Journal of Ethical Urban Living, and The Columbia Journal, where he tied for first-place in the winter 2017 writing contest. Check out more of his work on [his Facebook page](#) or contact him directly at the address above.

Posted by A Friend at [8:52 AM](#)



Labels: [Joseph Dole \(IL\)](#)

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rabbitthedigger said...

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