

The interconnectedness of all the beings on our planet--from the biggest animals and trees to the smallest of microscopic organisms--is always on our minds, but smaller questions of life also command our attention. From time to time, I start thinking about the visible animal life forms here on the farm, and I often wonder which of them could be called the "luckiest and happiest" one of all. I suppose that is anthropomorphizing to a great extent. It is quite likely a thought that does not cross the minds of our livestock and pets.

The cattle seem content, as do the sheep and the horses. The hens and turkeys are always ready to go to their quarters for the night, so I assume they are satisfied with life here. The dog and house cats pretty much do as we tell them, but they do not appear to be unhappy.

After giving it some thought, though, I truly believe that the happiest animal on the farm--apart from us, at least--is Butter, the barn cat.

Butter has a littermate brother that lives here in the cabin, going out to hunt as he wishes during the day, but confined to the house at night. Muzzy is a pretty white cat with a gray tail and some gray on his head. He was neutered when he was young, and his features are refined and gentle. He catches lots of mice when he is outside, and we appreciate his labor. He is also a great pet.

Butter, though, is of a different type. He is also mostly white, but his tail and accent areas are orange. He shows the effects of living as he wishes. He stays in the barn or sheep shed most of the time, or at least, he appears from one of those places at meal time. Occasionally, he goes away for days at a time.

When Butter returns from one of these "vacations" , he often shows the effect of his travels. There will be scratches on his face, sometimes he is limping, and once, at least, an ear was nearly torn off. Sometimes, he sleeps most of the time for a few days after he is home again.

Butter likes the livestock. He will position himself on a manger board so a calf or cow can lick him. And, I have seen him patiently washing the face of a yearling steer. He is equally friendly to the sheep.

Now, in the summer, we milk a couple of cows--or "half-cows," as

their calves are sucking on the other side while we milk. Butter comes and curls up under my milk stool, purring loudly the whole time. He is waiting for me to finish milking and fill his dish. Sometimes, he lazes the time away rolling on the warm concrete east of the barn. Or, he might follow me to the garden and interfere with the hoeing and weeding. At night, when we do not milk, Butter always gets his treat of dry cat food.

But, what really makes me believe that he is the luckiest creature on the farm is the fact that his world knows only the boundaries he establishes himself. The livestock on the farm are fenced in, given the freedom of the great outdoors only in a limited sense. The high tensile and/or electric netting fences keep them pretty much where we want them to be. We move them from place to place during the growing season, keeping them in fresh pasture as much as we can. When we decide to herd the sheep or cattle, the old dog helps, and they go where we direct them.

Butter does just as he pleases. He is a free cat, coming and going with no cares. When he does come back, he might be battered or proudly unscratched, but he throws himself back into barn life, ready to enjoy the company of the livestock and of us, until some inner signal tells him to go off to who knows where again, perhaps have a fight or two, maybe catch a gopher, and generally enjoy life on the road. I suppose that some day, he may meet a predator that fancies a snack and disappear forever. But, as long as he is here, he is a free and happy cat.