

How Not to Duck Life's Lessons

By Judith LeRoy and Spot

I have a bone to pick with the human species (although, admittedly, as a canine, I'd rather chew on it than pick it). Humans call us dumb animals, don't they? The implicit contention, of course, is "non-human animals are dumber than humans." Right? I ask you, isn't that remarkably presumptuous? Is it not a universally acknowledged fact that many human brains have difficulty processing complex data? (Think math, here ... physics ... or even, God help us, logic.) It's not an insignificant fact that the only creatures ever described as "lame-brained" are humans. So, where do all those self-righteous lamebrains get off, calling us DUMB animals?

Be honest. From personal experience you know that in any given week, your humans exhibit a stunning array of mental lapses. Lapses that would earn you an NQ score in a herding or obedience trial. You don't mention those lapses, though, because it would be a flagrant violation of the rule that governs our relationship with humans: unconditional love and adoration, no matter how much they provoke you.

I should introduce myself. I'm a thirty five-year old brown Bearded Collie—yes, of course, that's in dog years (only a human would get confused, here). My name is Spot. Yeah, yeah ... the humans thought it would be clever to name a hairy dog with a brown spot on the top of his white head Spot. I've always thought of myself as more of an Adrian, a Benjamin, a Winthrop, or even a Heathcliff. I wince when they call, "Here, Spot," because I think of the other wonderful possibilities. And I positively shudder when someone commands, "Sit, Spot!" It's just wrong ... it sounds like something out of that Mary Poppins' movie.

Enough about me, except to say I'm not blinded by self-pride. When it comes to brainpower, mine is only average in the world of herding dog IQs. But my "average" often thinks circles around my keepers, bless their souls. Let's move on to some fascinating evidence suggesting that dogs and ducks may be smarter than humans, at least in some situations.

My friend Doug is a duck. (Get it? Doug the Duck. That's what our neighbors, who've owned Doug since he was a fresh-hatched duckling, named him. Way too cutesy, in my estimation.) Doug had a rather remarkable misadventure last week, and it all stemmed from human ignorance.

Doug's a rather plain duck—white with yellow bill and feet, just like a million other ducks that hang around farmyards with the cows, pigs, and chickens. Doug says that chickens are the most excruciatingly stupid animals on earth—along with their cousins, the turkeys. Much worse than humans. So dumb, they give birds a bad name, he says. But, Doug reminds me, they are just land birds, and what can you expect from egg-laying ground peckers?

Doug, considering the bird disadvantage, is rather clever for a duck. He can play dead, beg for corn, and hold his head under water in his humans' swimming pool for lengthy periods. He's not dog-smart, though, and this disadvantage may have contributed to his misadventure. Add to that, he's an always hungry gadabout who frequently leaped his fence to look for stray MilkBone crumbs and stimulating conversation in my backyard. These proclivities probably contributed to his downfall.

Doug's not a very good flier, but he has learned to flutter his small wings fast and furiously enough to lift his heavy body to the top of the wooden fence that separates our back yards. For a few scary seconds, he teeters on the fence top, and I wonder whether he'll tip backwards, beak over tail feathers into his own yard, or lurch off his perch and take a belly flop into mine.

The usual time for his visits is late afternoon, a time when I like to chill out in the yard. The sun is warm, the shadows are cool, and the kids are busy with friends, toys, or TV. In the couple of years Doug has been coming to visit, my human family has never glimpsed him ... they're usually busily engaged in human things and they haven't much interest in my mundane backyard relationships.

Oh, yeah. I didn't tell you about my human family, did I? First, there are "Him" and "Her," who are at least 250 years old (dog years, yes), and then there are the kids. Judy is in first grade—that's just beyond Basic Obedience Class, from what I gather—and Baby Alice. Alice is so young she can't get up on her paws very well yet, but she can bark real good. "Learned it from Spot," they say, and sometimes she even fools me. I hear her barking and come barreling in through the doggy door to see if, inexplicably, I have visiting canine company. I say "inexplicably" because it's never happened. Not yet. Still, one must be hopeful.

I mention the kids because they're a big part of this story. "Him" and "Her" (Dad and Mom, the kids call them, and I've fallen into the habit, too) try to instill in their offspring "good, moral values" despite the "crap they see on TV" (says Him) and the "materialistic, self-destructive tendencies of modern society" (says Her). So, we have little Moral Value Object Lessons now and then.

Who would ever have suspect that poor, innocent Doug would fall victim to one of them?

It all happened because Doug flew over a little later than usual last Friday. Just as he scarfed up the last crumb from my lunch MilkBone, She (Her, Mom) walked into the backyard, carrying Baby Alice, and she saw Doug. "Oh, my!" she said. "There's a duck in the backyard."

Doug's a friendly soul, and when she started talking at him, he got excited, quacking away and flapping his little wings.

"Oh, dear," said she, "however did you get here?" (Did she really expect a cogent reply? From a duck??)

Baby Alice got excited, too, and she started to bark. That surprised Doug—he'd never heard that sound from a human before, even a young one, and he flapped a little harder. Then Alice tried the growl she's been working on, and Doug really went off his rocker. He quacked and flapped like mad until Judy heard the ruckus and came running out to the backyard to investigate. Judy's a little smarter than the rest of them, so she told Alice, "Quiet!" like they bellow at me when I'm trying to warn them that the little brown UPS truck has just sneaked up our driveway.

So, everything calmed down a bit. Then Dad walked into the backyard.

"What's going on here?" He looked around. "What's a duck doing in our backyard?" I tried to explain things, but Dad just frowned at me and said, "Quiet, Spot. We don't need *your* barking ... Alice's is enough." Dad pondered the situation and declared, with great certitude,

“There can’t be any ducks around here. They live in the country.”

“There are ducks in the park, Dad,” corrected Judy. “They live by the pond and people throw breadcrumbs at them. Remember? We used to do that when I was four, before that duck pooped on your new running shoes and we stopped feeding them.”

Distaste stirred memories in Dad’s brain. “The park. It’s only about three blocks away,” he ruminated. “This duck must be a park duck who strayed.”

I remembered the park very well. They used to take me there to practice long downs, way before the duck poop incident. The ducks were supposed to be distractions for me—the young, excitable Bearded Collie. As were the balls the kids were always kicking, throwing, or bouncing. I could handle the ducks, but the balls were (and still are) a completely different kettle of fish. They proved such a GREAT distraction that we stopped practicing long downs in the park.

“You’re right!” Mom told Dad. “I’ll bet this poor little fellow is from the pond in the park.” Mom watched Doug’s frenetic antics. “Just see how he’s quacking and flapping his wings. He’s trying to fly home. He’s really unhappy,” Mom murmured worriedly. “I wonder how he got here?”

Ah, yes. An important question they should have asked themselves, wasn’t it? Obviously, he hadn’t flown here. So how did he get in our back yard? He couldn’t have hailed a taxi or caught a bus. But they never addressed the crucial issue. No, they just blundered on.

Dad, Mom, Judy, and Alice watched Doug’s ineffectively whirling wings. Doug wasn’t truly unhappy, especially since Alice had stopped barking. He was just asking for food. Not understanding duck-talk, Mom ignored Doug’s request and launched further into her anthropomorphic fantasy. “He somehow got separated from his friends, and now he’s lonely for them.” Her face drooped in an ultra-sad frown, indicating to young Alice that this was, indeed, a very sorry state of affairs. But Alice wasn’t paying much attention and Judy had other ideas.

Judy, rapidly approaching that chronic parent-doubting age, looked at her mother dubiously. Throughout history, that look has provoked errant acts from parents of all species ... acts designed to prove they’re a lot smarter than their offspring think they are. Mom lunged into action with “The Lesson of Responsibility”—caring for those less fortunate than yourself. And what’s more unfortunate than a little “lost” duck?

“We’ll have to take him back to the park,” Mom announced decisively. She said to Dad, “Get Spot’s old puppy crate and put the duck in it. I’ll get Alice’s stroller.” Then she commanded, “Judy, get your red wagon so we can put the crate in it, and we’ll pull it to the park. We’ll take the poor little duckie back to his friends so he won’t be lonely anymore.” She looked at Baby Alice. “And after we take Duckie to the park, we’ll all wave bye-bye to him.” Baby Alice looked impassively at Doug, then gave the plan a little “woof” of approval.

Mom bustled back into the house with Alice while Dad scowled at her retreating back. There was doubt in his eyes, and God only knows what was lurking in his heart and mind. She must have sensed his recalcitrance, because she shouted over her shoulder, “It’ll be a great learning opportunity for the kids.” Resistance turned to resignation ... he knew he’d lost this skirmish. How can a mere mortal father get in the way of a “Great Learning Opportunity?”

So, Dad hauled the puppy crate from the garage and put it on the ground near Doug. He

opened the crate's door and wondered how he could lure the duck inside. No problem. The crate smelled like ancient dog biscuits, and Doug, always hungry, waddled in. Dad, relieved and amazed that it was all so easy, slammed the crate's door shut. Doug was no dummy. He immediately grasped his predicament. He'd been tricked! No biscuits, no kibble, and he was a prisoner. Doug got indignant. Really indignant. He started a raucous quacking, flopping around madly in the crate. Feathers were really flying!

This was not good. I knew that Doug should go home, not to the park. I bounced around and barked my fool head off. I put my front paws on Dad's waist and explained, in very simple words, that he was making a big mistake. But he's no better with dog-talk than Mom is with duck-talk. He muttered to me, instead, "I know, I know. You're a herding dog and you want to help. But the job is almost done. All that's left is to take this damn duck back to join the rest of his shoe-pooing clan. Maybe that will make him happy."

In your dreams. Doug will NOT be happy set adrift in the park's pond—forced to work for a living—not even with the shoe-pooing incentive. Doug's idea of camping out is a night in a Holiday Inn with a black and white TV. I kept barking and Doug kept quacking, but they put the crate in Judy's wagon, nonetheless. Alice was strapped into her stroller and all four of them headed off to the park to wave bye-bye to little Duckie-Wuckie Doug.

A couple of hours later, after my dinner, I returned to the back yard for a little pre-bedtime catnap and I heard voices on the other side of the fence. "Doug. Here, Dougie-Duck. Come get your food, Doug. It's almost bedtime, Doug? Doug?" I put my head on my paws and closed my eyes. If they only knew.

More voices joined in, muttering, wondering, worrying, but a young girl's voice was loudest and most plaintive. It must be Beth. Doug told me that Beth is his favorite person because she often sneaks him extra corn. Beth, who got Doug as an Easter duckling, was distraught about her missing pet. I heard her wails and sobs over the back fence. I know what you're thinking. Not many people have pet ducks. If there were more pet ducks, there'd be far fewer restaurants serving duck l'orange, wouldn't there? But Beth is a live-duck lover, and she was clearly heart-broken at Doug's disappearance.

The ensuing weekend was a quiet one for me, Doug being banished to the park and all. But on Monday, I was in the yard and I heard Judy's return from school. "Mom. MOM! Guess what I heard at school today! Beth's duck is missing!"

I hoisted my ears. This should be good. I hustled through the doggy door as Judy said in an excited voice, "Beth is in Miss Hickey's class at my school, same as my best friend Melissa. Beth lives just behind us on Willow Street. Melissa says Beth had a pet duck named Doug. And on Friday, the duck wasn't in her back yard when she went out to feed it!" Judy took a breath. Then she said, ingenuously, "You don't think it was Beth's duck we took to the park, do you?"

Mom's eyes widened. She was thinking fast. Was it time for a lesson in self-preservation ... "Evasive Tactics to Escape a Predicament of One's Own Creation?" But, being a righteous and honest person, she got a grip. "Role Modeling" and "Responsibility for One's Actions" kicked in, and she sighed and said. "We'll have to go over to Beth's house and tell her parents

what happened. Just in case maybe the duck we brought to the park was Beth's ..." her voice trailed off.

Maybe the duck we brought to the park was Beth's? Oh, for God's sake. Of course, the duck was Beth's! How likely is it there'd be two stray ducks in a single block off Willow Street on any given Friday afternoon?

"What if we just went to the park and found the duck and brought it back to Beth's house?" Judy asked, tentatively. She'd rather not face the music, either. A glimpse of hope appeared in Mom's eyes. "What a good idea, Judy! Dad will be home in half an hour, and he'll be so pleased with your thoughtful suggestion. We'll get him to help."

Pleased? No way. He was gonna die—just die. I knew it.

Mom got out the crate, the wagon and the stroller, put a sweater on Alice, and waited for Dad. This was going to be another family affair, apparently. Then they got my lead and snapped it on my collar. "Spot's a herding dog, after all," Mom reasoned. "He can help us catch Beth's duck." They were really grasping at straws. And I resented my conscription. I was simply an innocent bystander who had nothing to do with the duck-napping and wanted nothing to do with a duck rescue.

Dad arrived, and he was predictably bemused when told the sad tale. He scraped his hand through his hair like he did at the Agility Trial when I jumped over the weave poles instead of wove through them. He was as reluctant as I was to become tangled in this mess, but he was shamed into participation when Mom launched into the maxims of: "Role Model for the Children," "Great Learning Opportunity," and "Doing the Right Thing." She wasn't pulling any punches here.

We all traipsed off to the park.

I was amazed to see that the population of park ducks had increased so flagrantly since the days of my last long down. I suspected duck birth control is probably an inexact science, because there were easily several dozen ducks in residence at the pond. Mom and Dad stared at them and looked overwhelmed. Judy carefully studied each duck, looking for clues, and Alice barked—an activity guaranteed NOT to make the task easier. The ducks quacked, flapped, and scolded. They didn't like barking humans of any age.

We watched the ducks mill. Dad sighed. He lifted the crate out of the wagon, put it on the ground between us and the ducks and, with more optimism than he probably felt, opened its door. Judy continued to stare, serially, at each duck. Then she asked the crucial question ... the question flitting through all our brains, "So, how do we know which duck is Doug?"

Her father said, caustically, "I guess we should have dyed him pink so we could spot him in a crowd. I just never imagined we'd be wanting him back." Mom glared at him. She doesn't like sarcasm. Especially in front of the children.

Pink, I mused. Doug wouldn't have liked that. Doug isn't a pastel personality. I hadn't time to muse any further because a duck separated itself from the throng of quackers and waddled toward me. That duck looked familiar. I started pulling on my lead, barking. Alice

barked, too.

The approaching duck was thinner, svelter than I remembered my friend Doug to be. Outside of that, it sure looked like Doug, though this duck's eyes were flinty hard, and it appeared to be hopping mad ... or, at least, fast-waddling mad. I'd never seen Doug mad before, but I thought I recognized his guttural, accusatory quacks.

Obviously, the weekend in the park hadn't been a picnic. His ill humor wasn't surprising, because grubbing around for breadcrumbs wasn't Doug's style. There was wrath in Doug's eyes as he stalked toward us. Dad, Mom, Judy, and Baby Alice stared at the approaching menace. "Ducks don't get rabies, do they?" Dad whispered nervously. Mom was speechless. Judy hid behind the stroller, but Alice, ever ferocious, continued barking. Something had to be done, so I yanked myself free of Dad's feeble grasp on my lead and bounded over to Doug. I whispered in the vicinity that I thought must be his ear, "Hey! We've come to take you home."

"Food!" was all Doug said.

I followed Doug as he approached the crate behind which Dad, Mom, and Judy huddled. Doug stalked through the open door of the crate, settled himself inside with a great shake of feathers, and pecked ungratefully at Dad's hand after Dad got his wits about him and reached to close the crate's door. Doug was making sounds a lot like Alice's most vicious growls. This was one angry son-of-a-duck!

Dad put the crate in the wagon, and Mom and Judy hugged me, petted me, scratched my ears, and told me I was the cleverest dog ever, to capture the lost duck, though I suspected at that moment any live duck would have sufficed. Even Alice seemed impressed. She yelled, "Good Gog!" and her barks and growls turned to joyous howls reminiscent of those I utter in response to a wailing fire siren. Alice recognized a lucky break when she saw it and was celebrating our good fortune. Then she looked at the puffed up, un-mollified duck in the crate and uttered her very first, hesitant, "Quack-quack-quack." She waved her short arms in a fairly decent imitation of Doug in his most recent fit of pique. "Quack-quack-quack," Alice repeated in a deep-throated duck-like voice. We all stared. The scariest thing, it sort of soothed Doug. I wonder what she said.

Judy held my leash, Dad pulled the wagon, Mom pushed the stroller, and we all toddled off to Beth's house. The humans were silent, hoping against hope that Beth wouldn't take one look at the duck, call it an imposter and all of us frauds. I wasn't worried, though. I knew we had our duck. When we got there, Judy knocked tentatively, and Beth opened the door. "We've got your duck," Judy told Beth out loud, then, under her breath she muttered, "I think."

Beth took one look and screeched in the manner (unfortunately) so characteristic of a six-year old girl. Alice looked at her in awe, and I knew it wouldn't be long before she tried to reproduce that ear-splitting shriek. Beth was obviously ecstatic to be reunited with her duck—and it was her duck. Mom and Dad sagged in relief, and Beth's mother asked, in wonderment, "How did you ever find Dougie?"

"Just luck," said Dad. Mom looked at him but didn't say anything. Judy said lamely, "Spot found him."

Then Beth and her mom petted and hugged me, and Beth said I was a hero. They gave me a real live chocolate chip cookie. Wow! I'd never tasted a hand-baked treat like that before.

It really ruins you for those stale, cardboard-flavored Safeway MilkBones.

It's nice to be a hero, but the unfortunate part of this story is that I've lost a friend. Doug doesn't visit me anymore. Not even when he knows I've got fresh kibble and am willing to share. We talk through the fence now, Doug and me. He's not ready to risk a flyover because he's convinced my people are nuts, and he isn't willing to take any chances. I try to tell him that being nuts doesn't make my humans bad creatures. It's just a characteristic of their species, like peeing on fire hydrants or chasing sheep is of mine. Not bad, just different. I told Doug that what they really are is "cognition challenged." Luckily, they don't feel handicapped by it, and they go blithely on their way, bumbling through life. You can't hold this against them, because most of the time they mean well.

But Doug insists, no, they're not just cognition-challenged ... they're categorically stupid. "I spent a weekend in cold water in the park, being mercilessly attacked by uncivilized ducks whenever I ventured ashore to peck at a lousy, stale breadcrumb. I'm not forgiving any dumb-arsed human being who mistakes me for JUST ANY rag-tailed, primitive waterfowl." Doug's not ready to forgive, forget, or to change his opinion about human intelligence. I must admit, he's got good cause.

After hearing a story like ours, a sensitive, perceptive human being might think twice when comparing non-human to human animal intelligence and finding us wanting. It's probably a case of pot calling kettle black, as my old Scottish grandmum used to say. Underrating the brainpower of hairy and feathered friends and overestimating the mental acuity of their bald-skinned and non-feathered brethren are grave human errors. It's time for humans to re-evaluate ... for their own best interests if not for ours.

Here's a suggestion. Don't ever utter the words "dumb animal" again. Next time, Doug and I may not be there to save you.