



By Chris Batin

Schnitz knows best

Big love comes in a tiny package

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, MY WIFE, HEATHER, PICKED ME UP AFTER I HAD spent a day fly fishing for salmon. The action had been good, with hard-fighting fish, easy wading and several outstanding casts.

I showed her my limit of slab-sided silvers, hoping she'd take the bait by commenting on the catch. She reciprocated with a perfunctory smile, but no salmon would ever create the bubbling excitement I saw in her face. She finally blurted it out.

"We're going to have a new addition to our family," she gushed.

My face blossomed into a wide smile, a practiced response I learned long ago to maintain marital harmony when a spouse unexpectedly reveals life-changing news. Simply hide the emotional shock and surprise until the facts are known. The consequence of any dour expression is hours of droning admonitions from a marriage counselor intent on getting you in touch with your "feminine" side.

"You're the proud dad of a 7-week-old miniature dachshund puppy!" she bubbled. "We pick him up next week!"

I wracked my brain and vaguely recalled a distracted conversation where I agreed we could possibly look for a dog this fall.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

For decades, I've nurtured dreams of owning a well-trained retriever from a good gene pool that could stand guard for me in bear country, pose with photos of salmon or retrieve some ducks.

I remained speechless. No competent outdoor writer owns a dog the size of a snowshoe hare. I would have to carry it on long hikes and it would always and forever be an eagle attractant.

My professional image would be ruined.

I was ready to object, but Heather continued to shower me with photos of the pup she always wanted, and I could not disappoint.

On the way home, the air buzzed with excitement as she described how the puppy could accompany me on fishing trips and sleep cozy in his doggie bed at my feet as I worked in the office.

But when she cooed over how cozy the dog would be sleeping in bed with us, I finally burst out in bristled opposition.

"No dog will ever sleep in bed with us," I seethed in a slow burn. "A well-trained dog's place is always on the floor in its own bed, otherwise it's a one-way sightseeing tour to see the bald eagles at Homer."

She shrewdly diverted my attention to choosing a name, and we agreed finally on one better suited for a foreign head-of-state than a dog: Schnitz Kielbasy Nostradamus Oncorhynchus Batin. His godfather and family friend, Father David Dormer, picked Kielbasy. Nostradamus came because of Heather's love for astronomy and Schnitz' nose that only a mother could love. I had always wanted to name my outdoor dog *Oncorhynchus*, a scientific name for salmon and trout. But me shouting *Oncorhynchus* repeatedly on the Russian River with fly rod in hand would have people covering their children's eyes and scurrying them away, clucking aspersions at me for thinking I could catch salmon simply by calling them.

While dachshunds have a celebrated history of being superb hunt-



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Schnitz rests after a hard two days at the hospital.

ing and outdoor dogs with an excellent sense of smell, I doubted if Schnitz would make the cut. His puppy eyes didn't focus well. His Cornish-hen sized legs would collapse on a run and he'd nosedive into the grass.

The next day, I watched him sniff at golden leaves, paw at grass stems and eat a spider. Suddenly, I seemed lightheaded from what I was thinking, rather than feeling. It defied logic, but I was powerless to prevent my brain from being hijacked.

I was falling in love with the pooch.

While it was unthinkable a week ago, I decided to take time off work to explore the world through inquisitive puppy eyes five inches off the ground.

Pride swelled in me as I watched him repeatedly chase down his six-inch salmon toy, pounce on it with both feet and bite it repeatedly before shaking his head to dispatch it. I would take a leak, and he would do likewise. As we sampled treats on a hillside, I told him about sneaky snowshoe hares and where to sniff out plump grouse. If he agreed not to get spoiled, I promised to carry him safely across major rivers, but only if he would never track a bear scent without me.

The days of hard training would soon come, but it would not be these lazy autumn days filled with discovery and joy for the both of us.

Schnitz soon turned from an obedient pup to schemer one night

when I foggily sensed my otherwise cold pillow had a hot spot. Schnitz had climbed onto our bed, and eased up and placed his head on my pillow.

I smiled in anthropomorphic conjecture: Was this perceptive pup playing me? His warm tongue licked my face and soon the bed ban was an afterthought as we both drifted into peaceful sleep; a place where all is perfect with the world. Heather says I'm like bamboo; hard on the outside but soft on the inside. I disagree, arguing the arrangement is temporary. But I know better, and so does she.

I suspected something was wrong when Heather took Schnitz to the vet because he had blood in his stools. Test results showed him to be seriously ill with an infection deadly to most puppies.

Instead of fighting his salmon, he was now fighting for his life.

In the emergency room at the vet hospital, Heather and I held him through antibiotic shots and blood draws. My eyes watered at the thought of never again seeing that nose sniff out a mouse, pounce on bugs, or watch him chew his toy salmon.

After an emotionally dark two days, we received a phone call.

The vet said Schnitz was yapping, eating heartily and that she had never seen a puppy with this illness bounce back with such vigor and resilience. He could go home, especially since he had just chewed his intravenous line out of the kennel wall.

All I could proudly say was "That's my boy."

While he may not be much on size, I'm elated to have Schnitz as our outdoor dog, and we plan to explore Alaska with the same enthusiasm I've had all my life. This time, however, it will be through the eyes and playful bouncing of a puppy with a big heart that won't quit.

As I discovered, it's the only thing besides love that a true outdoor dog really needs.

Chris Batin has written about Alaska outdoors and travel for over



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Schnitz, a miniature dachshund puppy, taking a break from play for a photo.

42 years, and is author of numerous books available at www.AlaskaAngler.com. You can see more photos and keep track of the outdoor adventures of Schnitz on Instagram at @SchnitzTheExplorer.

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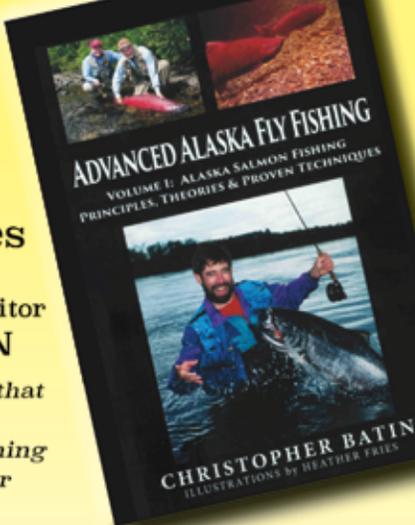


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