

Dr. Ernie Ward, DVM

Ernie has more than 20 years of experience in the veterinary industry and is a well-known veterinarian, media personality and author. He is also a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

I didn't as much choose to be a veterinarian as I was called into the profession. I was compelled to enter this great profession at an early age after suffering a traumatic incident. I was nine years old when I watched my dog die in my arms, plain and simple. It was in that instant that I dedicated my life and talents to helping animals. I want you to know that as I offer my unique perspective on the care of all creatures great and small. It's also not that plain or simple.

For me, entering the veterinary profession wasn't so much a carefully planned career choice as a spiritual necessity. Both my mother and father had grown up dirt poor on small rural family farms in southern Alabama and Georgia. Both had it hard - Depression Era-hard except the tough times lasted their entire lives. Both committed to graduating from high school and going to college, a feat that had yet to be accomplished by anyone in either family. At the time, you might as well have been talking about landing on the moon. College was a long, long way from Red Level, Alabama or Jakin, Georgia. My mother worked hard throughout high school and earned a college scholarship. My dad entered the Army, took a detour to Korea and then pursued his degree. They met at a (then) tiny south-Alabama college (now Troy University), made three babies and raised a family in the middle of the woods in rural southwest Georgia. I grew up with my best friends being a menagerie of

mutts, yard cats, chickens, rabbits, ducks and my budding imagination. Television was a no-no with chores and schoolwork the priority. Video games were still a decade away. My days were filled roaming for miles with my dogs along back woods trails, abandoned Civil War railways, and ancient logging routes. I didn't have a map, GPS, or cell phone and the only limit to my adventures was running out of sunlight. When I was in fourth grade I made a promise to my parents that I'd become a doctor if they bought me the four-volume Encyclopedia of Medical Facts. No joke. I upheld that

promise years later and became a type of doctor. But first I'd have to learn how to take care of my own animals.

The very first dogs I called my own were a couple of foundlings I named Taco and Missy. Missy was a sassy mixed breed and her brother Taco was a shaggy blonde, bigger and bolder. That attribute would prove fatal later. I was barely six years old when I discovered them holed up beneath an abandoned shed. I snuck them home and hid them in my room overnight. When morning arrived I was betrayed by their baying. That morning I received one of the worst whippings of my life. Animals simply were not allowed in the house under any circumstances. Later that same father, who tanned my hide for sleeping with two dogs, would share his bed with his own two furry family members. How life changes.

Fast forward a few years later and you'd witness a scene drawn straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting combined with a healthy dose of James Herriot, only deep-fried with a Southern drawl. Missy, Taco, and me were inseparable and shared innumerable hours exploring and learning about our natural world. I could spot a snake at fifty yards (and catch most of them), and knew every deer rub and scrape, rabbit hole, and quail covey within twenty acres. I learned to identify edible plants and roots (trial-and-error was rough), understood how the moon and seasons affected wildlife, and how to tread silently to spy upon a tiny sleeping screech owl. My two best friends were with me as I experienced these instrumental life lessons. We learned together, ate and drank together, played together - we were just together. And for that I'm eternally thankful.

A problem growing up in a rural setting is that the concepts of property lines and fences can be a bit blurry. Where exactly does one man's land end and another begin when all you can see are trees or fields? We had fences, the three-strand barbed-wire variety, that were great at keeping horses, goats and cows confined but did little to restrict wandering dogs and cats. And that was okay. In fact, most of the time it was a necessity. You'd often call on a dog to join you in a field half a mile away and he'd need to cross one or two fence lines. No big deal.

Until it becomes a big deal. As I mentioned earlier, Taco

was the bold one. Taco liked to roam alone. Roaming leads to mischief. Mischief as in killing a neighbor's chickens. Killing chickens gets you shot with a twelve-gauge.

I was long asleep when I was awakened by a commotion at the far end of the house. Visitors at any hour were rare but unheard of in the middle of the night. I heard my dad go outside and then some yelling. I got out of bed and went to my mother peering out the front window. My dad was returning to the house carrying something in his arms. I bolted out the door knowing exactly what he was holding.

It was Taco.

Half his right side was missing. Miraculously he was managing a few feeble gasps. As I reached for him, I saw him look at me. He was sorry for what had happened. Mostly he was sorry for leaving me too soon.

We collapsed in a heap there in the gravel. I didn't cry. I knew it was already too late. I told Taco that I loved him very much. I thanked him for being the best dog in the world. I laid my head on him and felt the warmth leave his body. In that instant I knew what I needed to do for the rest of my life. It wasn't a choice but rather a revelation. It just was. And has been ever since.

From that moment until today, all I've known is caring for animals, specifically dogs, cats and other critters. As you'll discover in my writings, my life has been one of deep dedication to learning and caring about the wonderful creatures we're blessed to learn from and live with.

After losing Taco, I knew what I must do, and be. That's why I'm honored to be called a veterinarian. It's not something I do; it's what I am. That's why this little boy grew up to be the veterinarian he is today.

Thanks, Taco.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of

your pets.