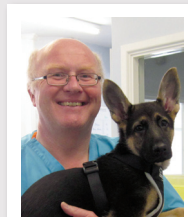


The Bear Necessities – part one

By retired local vet Richard Huddart MRCVS



Apart from one memorable veterinary experience, my encounters with BEARS have been confined to seeing them in captivity, along with some in the wild in Canada.

Whilst at a conference in Edinburgh a few years ago, I was intrigued to come upon this bronze sculpture in the Princes Street Gardens, near the Castle. The bear's nose is shiny following years of affectionate rubbing by passing children.

The bear's name is Wojtek (pronounced Voy-tek), and he is accompanied by a young Polish soldier. The story of how the monument came to be in Edinburgh illustrates the tragedy of war and the strong ties between Poland and Scotland.

At the outbreak of World War II, as Hitler's Nazis invaded Poland from the West, Russia advanced from the East and forcibly removed over a million Polish civilians and soldiers to prison and labour camps in the USSR. When the Germans later attacked Russia, those Poles who had survived were allowed to leave the camps. A Polish army was being formed (under the famous General Anders) and the soldiers, along with the civilian survivors, travelled to Persia (now Iran), where British troops were stationed. A tiny orphan bear cub was rescued at a market in Hamadan, and adopted by the soldiers. Over the next few months, Wojtek grew fast and became the mascot of an Army Unit, the 22nd Transport Supply Company.

General Anders' army travelled west to help the Allied war effort, notably in the Italian Campaign at the battle of Monte Cassino. Wojtek had become "imprinted" on his human companions, and learned to obey basic Polish commands. He wrestled playfully with the men and copied many of their behaviours, drinking beer from bottles.



Intrigued by the men smoking, he would accept cigarettes and promptly eat them!

To facilitate his passage overseas to Italy, he was assigned a rank and number, so he became Private

Wojtek!

At the height of the Battle of Monte Cassino, he was seen to be copying the actions of the men in his Unit, by single-handedly carrying live artillery shells from the lorries to the guns. This gave him legendary status among the Poles, with whom he continued to serve for the two years of the Italian campaign.

In 1946, his Unit finally sailed from Italy to Britain and he was "retired" to Edinburgh Zoo. He became very popular with visitors, especially children. He particularly enjoyed visits from his former Polish friends, who would treat him to illicit cigarettes! He remained at the zoo, dying of natural causes in 1963. Since then, many books and chapters have been written about him. His legendary status has grown to embody qualities of loyalty, strength and kindness even in times of great turmoil.

So that's Wojtek, and more "Bear Necessities" may follow soon!

