



WHAT ABOUT PREDATORS?

Alfred Francesconi, a wildlife photographer, sat in his blind across from the bait at the edge of the stream. The moon had risen, the night was still, and he expected to get good photos of a young raccoon who came there nightly. A shadow moved near the bait. The raccoon took a piece of apple in his forepaws and began to eat.

Before the apple was finished, another shadow swooped low and the raccoon was gone. A great horned owl had snatched him up and carried him away.

One day I heard commotion at a hollow stub far out in the swamp where a nest full of young chickadees were almost ready to fly. The mother and father birds were darting about, uttering frantic cries, while a raccoon climbed relentlessly upward to reach in and pull out the babies, one by one, and crunch them down.

Recently I heard an oriole calling high among the branches of persimmon trees in our yard. There was a frenzied tone in her voice. I soon saw the cause of her distress. A crow was hopping from branch to branch; I knew that a fledgling oriole must be there. My

waving arms and shouts did not deter the crow from his quest, and even a stream of water from the garden hose did not discourage him. When I left, he was still skulking about.

A starling whom I had raised from infancy was in his cage outside, learning to adjust to the outdoors before I would release him. Each night I took him into the house lest some predator should get him. Daytimes, however, I failed to close the bottom of the

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cage, as I wanted him to experience grass and earth. A black snake slithered under the cage edge and ate the bird.

Predation is part of nature. The playful pounces of kittens are rehearsals for adult life as predators. Songbirds are fueled by the insects upon whom they feed. The graceful swoops of bats and swallows are accomplished in pursuit of prey.

It is hard to accept predation in nature, as it is hard to accept pain

and sorrow in our own lives. Personally I wish it weren't so. But I have to take the bitter with the sweet. Nature is something far beyond my comprehension or control. Henry David Thoreau wrote: "If any part of nature excites our pity, it is for ourselves that we grieve, for there is eternal health, and beauty."

What seems to us cruel in nature, however, does not give us an excuse to be cruel ourselves. Nonhuman animals obey their instincts, which direct them to do the right thing, for the good of the whole. As humans, our powers and perceptions are such that we need the brake of human compassion, which we exercise by obeying the Golden Rule.

Human beings without compassion are like trucks without brakes. They have gone beyond instinct, assumed unnatural powers, and, now, must develop imagination and empathy to counteract the arrogance that power brings. So, although we cannot control nature, we can learn to control ourselves, and to treat fellow beings compassionately, in the midst of a natural world which sometimes seems to be cruel. □ □

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