

The business of life

I was at my southern house last week and saw two things that are stuck in my head. One was a great blue heron flying up in front of me with a squirming baby alligator locked in its giant bill. The other was a baby heron falling from a nest into a pond and a large alligator roaring across the pond and nearly catching it in its imposing maw. Luckily the fledgling heron had a few flight lessons and was able, by a nanosecond, to lift off the pond to the safety of its low-hanging nest.

Everywhere I look, some living thing is killing another to sustain its life. In the animal world it's all business. The heron leaves his roost in the morning with the sole purpose of eating anything and everything that will help to maintain its body weight. Fish, frogs, lizards and everything aquatic is on the menu.

The alligator lurks about the pond covered with algae, just its eyes showing, until some unsuspecting bird plops down close enough. Whammo! That giant jaw opens and shuts. A few feathers fly up and then slowly drift down on the scene of the crime. Next time it might be a small deer, lapping at the side of the pond, or a water rat busying himself building its nest. Alligators have been known to eat dogs, too. But it's not malice—just the business of being alive.

All of the animals that survive on each other's flesh seem to live in awful close proximity. On sunny days, the large alligators will haul themselves out on the banks of the pond, where they will close their eyes and soak up



Flotsam and Jetsam

By Donna Drago

the rays. Once they reach a certain size, nobody bothers them because they are at the top of the local food chain. It's not at all unusual to see egrets, storks and cormorants standing on the same bank precariously close to the alligator. I don't really understand it, but there are times when apparent truces are called and everyone can stand around on one foot and relax—even when the predator is just inches away. Occasionally a bird will stand on the gator's back.

In the tall grasses, both snakes and voles make their homes. Whenever I hit a lousy golf shot and end up searching for my ball in the grass I always wonder which of the two is going to sneak out and scare me. I haven't decided which would be worse. The ground is pockmarked with holes—snake, vole, snake, vole. It's in the voles' best interest to stay put—any rustling sound is like a dinner bell to the snakes.

When the snakes come out, the mockingbirds have a be-on-the-lookout call and alert each other to the predator's presence. I haven't seen it myself, but my neighbors say that snakes have been seen climbing trees and entering bird houses, where they treat themselves to eggs. The

mockingbirds seem to be aware of everything that goes on, and aside from the alarm call, which can be deafening, they will get together and chase the snake back into the grasses. This, I have witnessed and it made me feel like cheering—for the mockingbirds, of course.

All the killing is hard to witness, but imagine the alternative.

What would life be like if there were no predators? No prey?

What if the frogs didn't stick themselves to the house near where the flies hang around the lights? Frogs can put away hundreds of flying insects in the course of an evening. What if the bats developed a distaste for mosquitoes? That could be a disaster in a hot, humid place.

When alligators lay eggs, there can be up to 50 of them in a nest. But when you look at a typical pond in the south, there are usually just one or two large gators and perhaps a couple of smaller ones. Between hatching and maturity is an everyday struggle for survival. Last week, on the banks of the nearest pond, I spotted a "pod" of young gators, maybe 10-inches long. A couple of them were lying on their mother's back. They were extremely cute. On Thursday, I counted 10 of them. By Saturday, I only saw eight. I'm certain that by the next time I visit the south, the pod will be reduced to one or two. I don't particularly like the thought of tiny alligators in the gullet of the herons, or tiny herons in the gullets of alligators, but I accept that it is a necessary part of the business of life.

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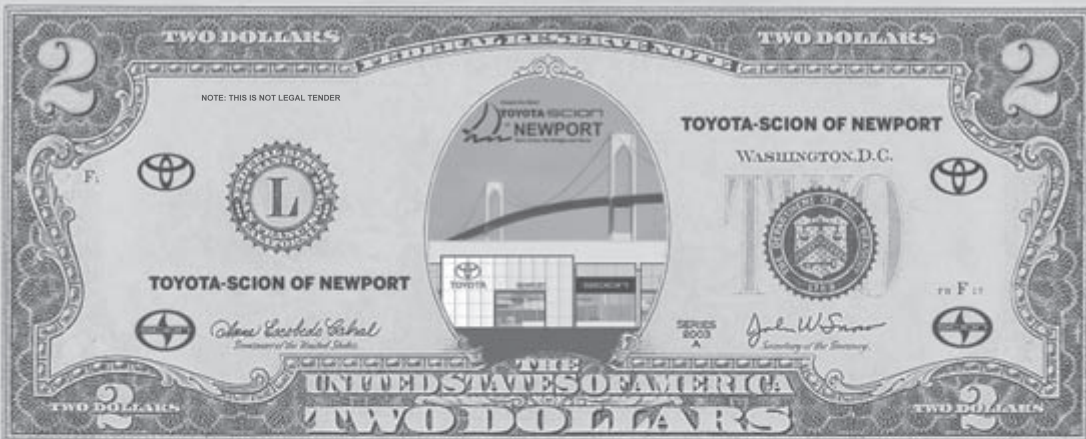
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