



Don't Look Back!

Quick, call National Geographic! I've got a great idea for one of their programs ... a wonderful suspense-filled wild-animal hunting scene! And they won't have to set up their cameras in a difficult and hard-to-access place - it's all happening on my kitchen window!

Anybody who spends any time at all observing animals (of any size) going about their daily activities soon has to come to terms with one fundamental fact of their life. Death is ever present. For most creatures, waking hours are spent in a constant hunt for nourishment, and nourishment typically involves killing and eating something else. And even creatures who browse on plant life and thus avoid such killing, are of course frequently at the other end of the equation, finding themselves hunted.

It's difficult for me to grasp what it must feel like to live under 24-hour threat of being killed, never being able to 'relax' and let go of one's defences for even the shortest time. I suppose it must be in our DNA, because back in our earliest days humans too lived that way, but it was a very very long time ago, and I for one have quite forgotten!

Here in late summer, early autumn, the greenery around my home is at its thickest and most dense stage of the year. The green curtain I cultivate on the south wall of the building has become an impenetrable thicket of greenery, perfectly performing its job of blocking direct sunlight into the rooms. A few weeks from now when the autumn chill sets in, I will *want* that sunlight, so down will come the curtain, but for now it stands in place, and it is *full* of life.

Some time back I watched one afternoon as a large praying mantis caught an even larger cicada, after lying in wait until it approached closely enough to be grabbed. The mantis pinned one of the wings of the cicada, preventing it from escaping, and as the fat insect struggled, proceeded to put it out of its misery in an extremely slow fashion - by eating it entirely, beginning with the bulging eyes, continuing with the rest of the head, and the working its way down the body bite by bite. Its own abdomen developed a fantastic bulge as the matter was transferred from one body to another, and after about four hours, the deed was done, and the unpalatable wings and legs were all that was left, dropping to the ground one by one.

It was only about half-way along the process that the cicada actually gave up the struggle and became still, actually long after its head had disappeared.

That may seem a particularly horrific way to die, and indeed, most of the hunting incidents that come to my notice are over and done with much more quickly. For the past few weeks a group of geckoes have been living on the outside of my kitchen window. They have found this to be a very productive environment, as my kitchen light is usually on in the evenings, and this of course draws a constant stream of insects to the window.

Because the geckoes walk around freely on the outer surface of the glass, I have a grand-stand seat for the action. Last night I watched one of the larger ones stalking a moth that was parked on the window. It took him around ten minutes or so to cover the few inches that initially separated them, and it was fascinating to

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watch. He lifted each foot in turn, and put it forward ... ever ... so ... slowly ... After a pause, he would then move another foot in the same fashion. The forward movement of his body was practically imperceptible.

How close would be able to come before the moth detected his presence and flew away? I placed my bet on the moth; I was sure that at some point he would simply fly off, leaving the gecko staring at an empty spot.

I was wrong. When Mr. Gecko was still quite too far away - or so I thought - he made his move, darting forward far more quickly than I could follow, and the game was all over in a flash. Snap! The moth, which a moment before had been peacefully just sitting there, now found himself suddenly enveloped inside the dark cavern of the gecko's mouth, with his wings sticking out each side.

Chew chew chew ... followed by a gulp, and it was all over.

And once again, I say a quiet 'thank you' to all my predecessors - the men and women who, at a glacial pace step by step over the millennia, built our society and culture into its present state, one that allows me to sit here and tell you this little story *without* having to constantly look over my shoulder to see what might be creeping up on me!

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