

## **IN NATURE, FEW CRITTERS LIVE TO DIE OF OLD AGE**

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Few living wild things die a natural death. Those who spend much of their lives outdoors become acutely aware of that fact. This was once within the realm of only naturalists, outdoor enthusiasts and occasional bystanders. Today through the wonder of television everyone can be enlightened and learn nature is not always kind to its denizens.

I personally through my work and sport have been privileged to learn this firsthand. I witnessed three different examples a couple of days ago as a bystander.

While busily engaged in staining our house, my concentration was distracted by some high-pitched sounds from the nearby driveway. Glancing over my shoulder I saw a rather large garter snake swallowing a small toad feet first. Its frantic cries were soon stifled as he faded from view down the snake's gullet. The snake immediately beat a hasty retreat into the nearby shrubs and grass.

One has mixed emotions about such things. Poor toad, think s I, and then, oh well, what about all the poor critters it had scooped up - then lucky snake to have such an easy meal. My joy for the snake, however, was short lived.

A short while later old friend Chuck Neilson, who has a camp on Rondaxe Road, stopped by along with Jack Russell Terrier, Rowdy. You can guess the rest; Jack Russell Terriers are compact little fellows always looking for trouble. It took him about a half an hour of tracking and searching to make short work of the snake. Rowdy, it seems is an accomplished snake hunter with plenty of experience. Twice copperheads that resulted in one hundred bucks each for anti venom serum bit him.

All snakes and toads are predators and one might opine that their demise is poetic justice.

While we were at lunch we were treated to another display of interaction between prey and predator. This time it proved to be a standoff of sorts.

We feed several species of birds here at our home. They attract various hawks and kestrels on a regular basis. A kestrel, or sparrow hawk, is the smallest of the hawks and like Rowdy believes they are invincible. At least the one in this story did. Normally, most of the kestrel's prey is small birds, insects and mice or shrews. In this case, much like the baby chicken hawk in the cartoon that has designs on a full-grown rooster, this bird was determined to have a kingfisher for lunch.

The kingfisher was every bit as large as the kestrel. He made several forays into the river after his lunch. The kestrel dove after each one of these, but the kingfisher eluded every attempt appearing not the least bit concerned by the kestrel's actions. We never did learn the outcome as both contestants moved away down river beyond our view. If you have ever seen the beak on a kingfisher and its sturdy build, you, too, would be very interested in the final result.

The true picture of wildlife and nature is far removed from the one portrayed by Disney and Spielberg. Children who only are exposed to such fantasies grow up with misconceptions that in many instances cause more harm than they do good in the scheme of things.