

Predators in Action

By Dr. Leonard Lee Rue III

The simplest definition of a predator is “a creature that eats another creature”. That could be a spider eating a grasshopper, a robin eating a worm, a fox eating a ground squirrel, a bear eating a moose or you and me eating a hamburger.

In the mammal world, and we are mammals, an identifying characteristic is that the predators have eyes on the front of the head so that we have binocular vision. This allows the predators to have better depth perception which is so important in accurately gauging exactly how far it is to a prey species that is to be caught. Prey species have eyes on the side of their heads and can see about 310 degree of a circle. In other words, they can see the predator behind them as well as they can see one in front of them.

It must be remembered that no predator species ever wipes out its prey species. If it did so, it would starve to death. Predators can, and often do, greatly reduce their prey species but, when this happens, it reduces the amount of food that the predator has to eat. With a shortened food supply the predators cannot have as many young and at times they will have no young at all. This reduces the number of predators which, in turn, allows the prey species to recover and increase in their numbers. There really is no balance of nature, but it is a constant pendulum swinging between high and low populations of both the predator and the prey.

We humans may feel sorry when a fawn is killed by a wolf or if a hawk takes a song bird off our feeder. We must remember that no creature is good or bad. Those are human terms based on human emotions. When a predator takes a prey species, it is simply doing the job for which it was designed and, in turn, helps to design the prey upon which they feed.

The deer is a fast and graceful animal; it has to be, to escape the wolf or the coyote. Ducks can fly fast to escape the falcon. Predators do help to improve their prey species also by feeding upon the old, sick and infirm animals. They don't do this knowingly, but such creatures are slower and more easily caught.

Prey species also have the advantage of having a high reproduction potential. Mice, for example, are capable of reproducing at a very young age and have big litters. If we did not have predators to help control their numbers, the mice would eat so much of the grain that is raised in this country that there would be no food for us.

All members of the larger prey species, for example the white-tailed deer, have their young born at about the same time of the year. That means the predators are simply overwhelmed by the high numbers of fawns and cannot find or kill all of the fawns at one time. This is a great survival factor for the deer.

Some birds and animals migrate in large flocks or herds and, if attacked, they stay together for protection. The sheer number of a flock of birds or a herd of animals often confuses the predator because it is too difficult to isolate a single prey. A predator cannot catch a flock or a herd; it has to single out just one creature.

So, the next time you see a predator in action, remember that the predator is merely trying to do what we do three times a day. It is trying to get food for a meal so it, too, can live.

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Ambushed	Attacked from a hiding place.
Ancestors	Direct family members who were born before you.
Attempts	Tries to.
Beak	The bill of a bird.
Beneficial	Good for something.
Binocular Vision	Seeing with two eyes.
Bluff	To fake or to fool.
Cache	A protected or hidden source of food.
Canine	Refers to the four long, slightly rear-curving teeth used by animals to grasp prey.
Capture	To seize or grab.
Carnassial	The shearing teeth used by members of the dog and cat families to cut off a piece of meat to be swallowed.
Carnivore	Meat-eater.
Characteristic	A common habit.
Consumed	Eaten.
Convert	Change.
Crustaceans	A creature such, as a crab or crayfish, having a hard shell.
Darts	Moves quickly.
Definition	To explain.
Destructive	To destroy.
Devoured	Eaten.
Dominant	The largest or strongest.
Efficient	Done by the easiest and best method.
Elevated	Raised up.
Emotions	Human feelings.
Flock	A large group of birds.
Forcing	To apply pressure.

Gauge	To estimate.
Hunting Foray	Out searching for food.
Immature	Inexperienced, not yet an adult.
Infirm	Crippled, not healthy.
Instinctive	An action that can be taken without thinking, learning or being taught..
Literally	Actually, to do exactly.
Migration	The yearly movement of wildlife usually north and south, often over a lon distance.
Niche	A particular spot.
Pendulum	Swinging back and forth.
Perception	As seen.
Pinpoint	Exact location.
Predator	A creature that eats another creature.
Probe	To be used to poke into something.
Protein	A component of body cells.
Raptors	Birds of prey.
Reeds	Coarse, tall water plants.
Reproduction- Potential	Having a large number of young.
Salmon- Spawning Run	When the salmon leave the ocean to go up fresh water streams to lay their eggs.
Seize	To grab.
Skill	The ability to do a thing well.
Talons	The claws on a predatory bird's foot.
Target	A point aimed at.
Vegetarian	One who doesn't eat meat, fish or dairy products.
Vole	A small rodent, such as the meadow mouse.