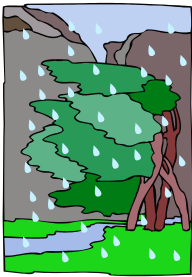


Chapter 11

This chapter contains details of predation.



When the two men woke the following morning, the rain was horizontal and heavy! The recent break in the weather had closed like a trap around them! They set up the little paraffin stove in the shelter and boiled up some water for coffee. There wasn't much water, so Will pulled on his waterproofs and bent his steps towards the stream.

One look at the stream told Will that it had been raining hard all night long! The stream was swollen, and gushed between rocks and boulders, tearing away at the banksides on the outside of the bends.

The water had also changed colour quite considerably since he had last seen it. Instead of the clear waters from which the sunlight glistened and winked, it was now the dark brown of tea. "We'll have to strain this lot," Will muttered to himself, as he bent to take water from a quieter spot where there was still a little beach to reach the water without hanging over a bank.

As he bent to his task, he noticed slots in the soft earth. Deer, he told himself. A little further to the left were other prints. Will looked at them carefully. They were quite large – certainly not a fox or badger. They weren't cattle or horse. They looked like a big dog – but a *very* big dog. On further examination and a rough guess at the size, Will began to wonder. "If it's round, it isn't a hound," he said to no one in particular. And these prints were *very* round! Will's mind went back to the tales he'd heard of 'The Durham Cat', There were many tales of large cats roaming the countryside in many parts of the country. They couldn't all be fairy tales – and these prints were huge!



Will made his way back to the camp, tossing over the day's findings in his head.

"Got the water, but it'll need some filtering. It's very brown," said Will. "The stream is really in spate. Must have chucked it down last night."

"Yeah, the brown will be the peat coming down off the moors," replied Jason.

"It's certainly made a mess of the water,"

"Important stuff, peat," said Jason. "Peat bogs support a really fragile plant and animal community. They are low in nutrient but high in moisture. Things that live in peat are usually specialists who couldn't survive anywhere else. That's a problem when peat bogs are dug up. Where does the local wildlife go then?"

"Yeah, I was reading that the peat that is sold to gardeners in garden centres comes from peat bogs that have taken thousands of years to develop. Imagine that! Thousands of years of development into a habitat, and then some gardener chucks it onto his soil just to help him improve his flowers!" replied Will.

"I read that over 94% of Britain's lowland peat bog has already been destroyed or damaged. I can't see the point when there are so many different things gardeners could use," continued Jason.

"You have to think about the carbon storage too," said Will. "Peat bogs have locked up countless millions of tons of carbon, stopping it getting back into the atmosphere and fuelling climate change. If we dig it up, it can mean that it goes back into circulation. Gardeners 1 – Climate 0, if you ask me!"

"Hmm," Jason mused. "I wish people would think about things before they do them. We should all refuse to buy peat products or plants in them and tell the shopkeeper why. We could even ask the shopkeepers to stock peat-free alternatives. And support shops that *do* sell peat-free stuff!"

"I make my own compost at home," announced Will, "It's easy! I just save up all of my uncooked vegetable waste – stuff like peelings and veg that's a bit past its date. You can include teabags, egg shells, leaves, cut grass, old cut flowers from the house, paper, even the dust from the Hoover! Just chuck it into the compost bin. To make it work really well, I bought myself a few brandling worms from a nursery – earthworms can't survive in compost. But brandlings love it! They really speed up the process. During the year, I get *free* compost for my pots, and to put on the garden."

"If you think about it, it makes sense, doesn't it?" mused Jason. "You pay for your fruit and veg by weight. Then you take it home and peel it or cut bits off it, or throw away the core. But you paid for that waste! If you compost it, you get that money back instead of wasting it."

"Yeah, and think about a paper towel. It's made from a tree.

- That tree was working for us, taking carbon out of the atmosphere.
- Someone makes it into paper. It might be a newspaper. So it's done another job.
- If you recycle the newspaper, it could be made into a paper towel. You buy it and wipe up your spills with it. It's just done another job.
- You put it into the compost bin and it rots down. Then you put it on your garden as compost. It works for you again, making your plants grow.
- And it's just turned back into a plant taking carbon out of the atmosphere again!

The two settled back to their meal, munching contentedly on fresh rabbit and beans, with slices of rye bread to mop up. Rye bread lasts much longer than ordinary bread under the tough conditions of camp. Suddenly, Will spluttered, almost choking on his bread. "I almost forgot, with all the talk about peat. I found some prints beside the stream!"

"What, human?" asked Jason? "We had visitors again?"

"No, cat," replied Will.

"A cat?" questioned Jason. "From the farm?"

"Not this cat," declared Will, "This was a really big lad. Massive pads."

Jason looked at him closely. He hesitated a moment. "Are you saying what I think you are saying?" Will just nodded. Jason sat for a while, taking in the implications of this news. "You sure?" he asked.

"Let's go and have a look. The prints might still be there, unless this rain has blotted them out."

By this time the two had eaten breakfast, the rain was easing and a weak sun was peeping out from behind the clouds. The two donned waterproofs, tidied up camp and wandered off through the woods, towards the stream. On arrival, Will indicated where he'd seen the prints. Will was right. Most of the prints had been washed away by the rain except one. Jason knelt beside it and bunched his fist to get an idea of the size.



It was huge! It was round! "This *is* a big lad!" he breathed. "You wouldn't want to meet him on a dark night."

"In a wood!" Will added. "Whilst camping!" <http://endurancebuzz.com>

"Hmm," muttered Jason. "Let's have a scout around and see what turns up," he said, staring around him, Eyes brown as a hunting fox, looking for any evidence of what they thought they'd found.

A little further through the wood, and out into an open field the pair spotted something lying by a dry stone wall. It was large. It wasn't moving. It was a sort of tawny-grey/brown colour. They made their way cautiously towards whatever it was, but it didn't take long for them to realise that it was in fact, a young roe deer or what was left of a roe deer! They skirted around the carcass, taking care to look at the very obvious wounds to the animal. The claw and teeth impressions were pretty typical of a big cat attack. Near to where the deer was lying was the stomach, which had been taken out and thrown to one side. Cats are carnivores and certainly wouldn't even think of eating the grass-filled intestines of their kill.

"To be honest," said Jason, "I think we should run DNA tests on this kill, just to satisfy ourselves as to what really did kill it."

Further from the carcass were more footprints. They were very large and very round. "If it's round" Will reminded him.

"Yeah," Jason breathed, "and I don't think it's long since it was here. Those pug marks are very new and this animal has not been dead long." The two looked carefully around them; the hairs on the back of their necks and arms standing to attention. Keeping a big cat from its kill is not a great idea in the long term. After taking photos, they decided to leave. Once out of view of the kill, Jason halted for a moment and called Dan on his mobile. He gave Dan brief details of where the kill was, and asked him to alert the vet.

They re-entered the wood across a stile on a marked footpath and made their way further toward the village. They hadn't gone far when they heard a strange noise, coming from the branches of a tree not too far distant. It was a deep-throated growl. Again, the hairs on neck and arms jumped to attention and their skin crawled! They glanced around and, no more than a few metres away from them, in the bough of a tree was a very large black cat! It was about the size of a German Shepherd dog. It was powerfully built, with large paws, a long tail and a small head. It stared at them for a moment, its yellow eyes peering out from ebony fur. Then it leapt down into a thicket and was gone!



This time, when Jason took out his mobile and dialled Dan's number, his hands shook a little. The question of the deer kill had been answered! This was one awesome moggie!

After an afternoon of walking, when they surveyed a lot more of the land for more kills, snares or digs, they finally decided to make their way 'home'. Their thoughts were still on the encounter they'd had with the cat. It was magnificent to see, but thoughts of it wandering into camp during the night were a little unsettling. They hoped that it was more afraid of them than they were of it, but the smell of food might attract it to their lair.

They reached the camp and hurriedly put a pan on to boil for coffee. They took out some of their food packs and soon rustled up a meal. They spent the evening checking their equipment and talking in hushed tones about the day and its implications.