

One Last Gift

Nature may be more in control than we think.

CAITLIN KIGHT



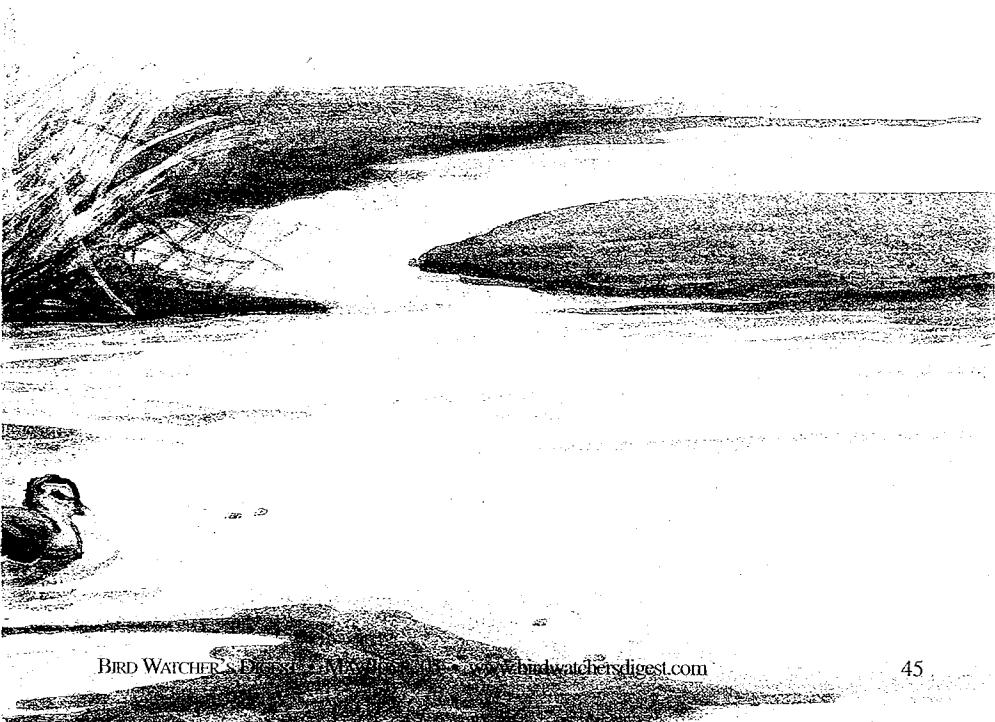
BIRD ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL DIGORGO

Jimi Hendrix once said, “Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.”

I verified this wisdom recently as I sat by the side of a dying Delmarva fox squirrel, an endangered North American species native only to the Maryland section of the Delmarva (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia) Peninsula. The squirrel, whose species is known to be heavier, slower, and less agile than the

more frequently seen gray squirrel, seemed to have fallen to the ground while edging along a high branch, or possibly while trying to jump from one tree to another. If this squirrel had been attempting acrobatics not natural to its body type, it surely was paying the heaviest price.

Clearly, the animal had at least one broken leg and possibly a broken back. When I approached, it



only lay panting and could barely drag itself a couple of inches away as it tried to escape. Soon it gave up and simply stared at me as I pondered what to do.

I had been conducting bird surveys in the forest, working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ascertain the population numbers and breeding activities of forest-dwelling bird species in the region. It was ironic to me that while I was attempting to record evidence of breeding and new young in one species, I ran across evidence of activity at the other end of the life spectrum in another species.

The circumstance made me consider the difficulties of being a field biologist, of seeing firsthand the cycles of life and death. Invariably, when thinking about this issue, I am reminded of the time I killed an animal with my car (aside from the thousands of insects I must squash on my windshield). It was during a trip between study sites while I worked as a bird bander. As I came over a rise I surprised a male cardinal that had been eating in the middle of the road. I barely had time to register the presence of this vibrant bird before I abruptly ended his life. I, the birder, the naturalist, who will not even kill flies when they appear in my house.

Animal death was a dilemma for me as a bander, as well, because the mist-netting process inevitably produces a few casualties. Humming-

birds sometimes are eaten out of the nets, oddly, by deer, the sensitive juveniles have a tendency to quickly die of stress, and very infrequently birds entangle themselves so tightly in the nets that strangulation results. Yet for the few birds that die, hundreds more are banded (to be later recaptured), yielding land-usage and breeding data that are useful to conservation groups who go on to protect and save thousands of birds.

All bird watchers will eventually come across nestlings that have apparently been abandoned, newly fledged young that seem lethargic from hunger and fear, or birds that are injured in some way or another but may survive (I recently saw a one-footed snowy egret that seemed perfectly happy). At what point, if any, do we interfere? How much of what we see is the natural process of death, part of a careful balance in the wild that protects our animals from overpopulation and the painful process of starvation?

I recall a mother and son who brought a white-tailed deer fawn to the refuge where I worked one summer, having found it bedded down in a field outside their home. They did not realize that the fawn's mother was likely nearby, feeding and keeping a distantly watchful eye on her young. If they returned the newborn to its spot in the field, they ran the risk of having imprinted it with the belief that humans, not deer, are its caregivers. Yet if they took it to a rehabilitation facility, there was the equal risk of exposing the animal to

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chronic wasting disease or confining it to a captive lifestyle.


Having decided to attempt locating a wildlife rehabilitation center (or even a generous local veterinarian) for the treatment of my fox squirrel, I gently lifted it to carry it back to my truck. Through the soft fur I could feel its tiny, frail ribcage and its widely spaced shallow breaths. As I walked, the animal barely made a peep, seeming to understand that a potential predator was the least of its problems at the moment. It did not take me long to realize that this squirrel was not merely injured. It was dying.

For more than 20 minutes I watched this representative of an endangered species alternately go rigid and relax, struggle for breath, and finally die. I wondered about humans and their relationship to wild animals and considered my own inability to do the most humane thing possible and put the poor animal out of its misery. As kind as it would have been to end the squirrel's suffering, I simply could not face causing the death of another animal. I hoped (in some silly, anthropomorphic way) that my presence was of some comfort to the animal during its painful last minutes.

Once the squirrel had gone limp for the last time, I curled the beautiful silver body in my hand, folded the bushy foot-long tail across the

squirrel's stomach, and carried it to a stand of trees to lay it to rest. I had pondered taking it to the refuge office for autopsy or freezing or stuffing, but ultimately I figured that the one thing I could do was allow the natural cycle of life to continue, and place the body where it could provide nourishment for other animals, insects, and plants.

I happened then to glance into the forest, where I saw a female wood duck leading her five young to their first foray in the flooded mudflats of the refuge. Here they might be eaten by hawks or snapping turtles, or might survive all the perils and one day reproduce. I was struck by the amazing circularity of it all: One animal perishes, another is born.

I was reminded of words from author Steven Coallier: "Attack life; it's going to kill you anyway." So it was that the squirrels and wood ducks had more to offer me than I could ever return—reminders that nature has things under control, though we human beings might sometimes forget it. 

Caitlin Kight is a writer who lives in Williamsburg, Virginia.