Wild Feast

Even on the first day of our lease, they were there: the phoebes. They danced around the outside of the cabin, flitting from branch to branch keeping close, keeping an eye on their home, but would not approach their own precarious, messy little nest on the rafter next to the transom window in our presence. I suppose we were loud, moving our boxes of sheets and towels and dishes into the cabin, marveling at the naked mountain landscape that would be ours each weekend for a year. By evening, we heard the first peeps crying out, and we moved from the open porch near their nest to the screened porch farther away and talked more quietly to try to allow the parents to feel safe enough to approach the nest with food.

While still in bed on day two, we could see the parents just outside the window next to the bed, servicing the nest. Out into the world to find wasps, beetles, dragonflies, moths, flies, or spiders, and back to place the sweet morsels into waiting mouths. We took our breakfast on the screened porch, in whispers, and every once in a while Mom or Dad would make a run for it and drop a nugget off to a chick. Then quick back out to a branch to watch the babies from afar, twitch their tails, and cheep at us with their "I'm not crazy about the fact that you're there but I'll just wait here as long as you don't do anything drastic" call, as one blogger described in her own phoebe family story.

After a few weeks of watching the feeding ritual, the patient, devoted, ever-vigilant mom and dad doing their parently duty, the chicks fledged, and everyone left. Soon thereafter, the whole process started again, beginning with the feeding of babes, this time with the parents a little more comfortable in our presence. They'd fly back and forth to the nest with their wiggling, live insects a half a dozen times while we ate our home fries and toast, and a half a dozen times again during our spaghetti dinners. The deck beneath the nest became a Jackson Pollock splatter of black and white bird droppings, but the phoebes were on family number two, and we had watched the whole family process for eight weeks, and so we forgave them this trashy mess. They knew us now. We weren't aunt and uncle material, not godparents or grandparents; more like the neighbor across the street whom

you've lived near for twenty years but have never really had a conversation with. You feel safe knowing they're there; they know your face; they might help you if ever you were in need, but you're not exactly friends.

One night around midnight, in bed in the darkness, a sound awakened me from the silence. The window at the foot of the bed. Motion. A discordant rapping. I sat up and turned the light on and found our bird neighbor—Mom or Dad—fluttering against the transom window, banging against it with erratic wings. It wasn't flying to and from a branch. It wasn't taking care of the nest. In fact, it seemed as though it couldn't even find, or see, the nest in the dark, like it had lost its night vision, become disoriented, not been able to find its way home. It seemed to be crying in distress, nearly pinned to the window in the light like a moth. "Help me!" it seemed to say.

Neil the naturalist got a flashlight and went outside, shining it over to the nest, with the idea that he would try to usher the bird back to its home with the light. As he moved the beam from bird to nest to try to light the way, he saw that being lost or disoriented was not the problem at all. That bird knew exactly where the nest was. So did a black rat snake stealthily slithering up the outside wall toward the nest. A black rat snake squeezing and releasing its undulating muscles, serpentining itself up the house with the friction of ribbed skin on wood. A black rat snake thinking that the newly hatched phoebes, still warm and soft, would make a nice midnight snack.

In a flash, Neil grabbed a broom from inside and swept the snake off the wall, then from the deck into the woods, a six-foot drop. Inside, I noticed the parent was still in quite a nervous state, and he or she had flown over to another window, closer to my nightlight and away from the nest and snake to continue its signaling. Maybe it didn't know the snake was gone, I pondered. Maybe it was too afraid to go back. Maybe it was still just upset. Or maybe—it finally dawned on me—the babies were gone.

"I don't usually get involved with nature like that," Neil told me the next morning on the front porch in the morning chill, a quiet, sad meal of tea and hot oats, our wildlife entertainment vanished. Just a few days previous, he had not let me save a long-horn beetle stuck and struggling in a spider web outside the bathroom window, encouraging me to let nature run its course. As a science teacher, birder, herpetologist, and generalized nature nerd, he's a purist that way. Everything is part of a web of life: some eat, some are eaten. It's when we disturb the balance of nature that our ecosystems suffer: too many deer, the chestnut blight, pythons in the Everglades.

But we had been witness to those phoebes' hard work over all those weeks and months. While we recreated with our books and naps and quiet writing and crossword-puzzle time at this relaxing hideaway, we had seen their effort; we oversaw the innate parenting instinct of a wild species, like in-laws—hands-off but concerned. In the passion of the moment the night before, I suppose Neil surrendered his ideals.

"That snake could've just found a mouse somewhere instead," he said with a huff.