

EARL'S PEARLS

The snake in the Christmas tree and other omens

by Earl Higgins

This is a true story. I bought a Christmas tree right after Thanksgiving and left it in my driveway, leaning against a fence, until two weeks before Christmas. After I'd wrestled with cutting the trunk and fitting the stand, my son announced to me that a snake had fallen out of the tree. Sure enough, a four-foot-long rat snake, sluggish from the chilly weather, lay on the concrete under the tree.

When I poked at it with a stick to chase it into the grass, it went back up the tree. With some trepidation and emboldened by the heavy gloves I was wearing, I pulled the critter from the tree and sent him off into the bushes to wherever snakes go when they've been forcibly evicted from Christmas trees.

Raccoons prowl my backyard at night, make my dog skittish, and scavenge any uneaten dog food. Possums run across the streets in my neighborhood after dark.

Let me stop here and explain that I don't live in the country. I live in a suburb of New Orleans, and, although there are lots of trees and a few vacant lots in the neighborhood, the area is quite built up with homes on modest-sized lots. Thirty-five years ago when I was a boy scout, my troop used to camp in the general vicinity where I now live.

At that time the area was woods and swamp full of palmettos that we scouts would cut to make thatch lean-tos. The lots have since been filled with river sand and covered with lawn grass. The old hackberry and willow trees have been removed, and new oaks, pines, and magnolias have been planted and grown tall since my childhood. But something is happening.

On the day before Palm Sunday I cut fronds of palmetto that were growing up through my landscaped shrub beds. I have lived in the house for over ten years and have never planted palmettos. I thought they had

been cut down and had died when the subdivision was developed. But they're coming back, sprouting from a primordial source beneath the fill dirt. Why?

When we moved in, there were hardly any squirrels. Now they're in every tree. They gnaw on green pine cones and toss their scraps onto our lawns and streets. They seem to enjoy trashing the neighborhood.

I used to think that hawks and crows would never flock around populated areas. The crows hang out, noisily, in a tree across the street from my house, while the hawks of summer nest in a tall tree where they can watch the traffic.

Flocks of doves, obviously aware that hunting is prohibited, assemble in the yards in the morning. Egrets and ibises wade in the big ditch at the end of the street. Urban crows? Hawks soaring on thermals rising from asphalt streets? What's going on? I'm starting to get scared that these are some of the biblical signs of the End of Time.

On the other hand, maybe Mother Nature and the creatures of her realm have been pushed aside long enough. In their own way they are telling us that the land belongs to them, too. Just think of the revenge the plants and animals could take on us if they were capable of conspiring and plotting. If Moby Dick can take vengeance on Captain Ahab by destroying his ship, think what a group of Louisiana black bears could accomplish if they got organized.

The red wolf is now endangered in Louisiana, but maybe those red wolves should read "little Red Riding Hood" and "Soldier of Fortune" magazine together and start taking back what was once theirs in a more aggressive way.

But even more effective, from a psychological perspective, would be that most annoying of contemporary tortures, a lawsuit. How would you respond if you received a summons to answer a petition filed in court by Bambi Deere, Ted E. Bear, Fern Glen, Paul Metto, Jim Crow, et al.? Check your homeowner's personal liability insurance policy. I wager that it does not include the cost of defense of such a lawsuit.

Standby for rough times, folks. The millennium is less than eight years away, and we may have to move back into the caves by then. Δ

Volunteers needed for Project Swallow

As you may know, the environmentally important Purple Martin species is declining. At the Smithsonian Institute, Dr. Eugene Morton's research indicates that the species has declined by over ninety percent since John James Audubon's time. The Audubon Society has had them "Blue-listed" for the past decade.

Before New Orleans area based Project Swallow was created, most of the injured, orphan, and sick Purple Martins died. The organization has developed methods and means to now save these birds. But volunteers are needed! This is a good conservation and environmental project. Anyone interested in helping four hours a week, please call Project Swallow and Sierra Club Members: Carlyle Rogillio at (504) 888-5510, or Dorothea Dell at (504) 833-1369. Δ

The Joe Herring saga continues

Joe Herring has requested that the Louisiana Natural Heritage Program (see the April issue of the Delta Sierran) be moved to Recreation & Tourism. This makes him look pretty silly considering that it was agreed, Mr. Herring included, that the program would remain where it was as a separate program.

As for the non-consumptive user fee attached to hunting license, a substitute bill No. 667 has been put forth that establishes a stamp to visit wildlife refuge areas and it qualifies for the 3:1 federal matching funds. This separates the user fee from the hunting license itself, which should make non hunters more comfortable supporting the fee.

Write Governor Edwards and ask that the Natural Heritage Program be kept where it is at the same funding levels as last year. The Natural Heritage program is the keystone of all of Louisiana's non-game programs. Actually, it is the only program that truly addresses non-game issues besides scenic rivers.

Governor Edwin W. Edwards, P.O. Box 94009, Baton Rouge, LA 70804, (504) 342-7015. Δ