

The Nature Story: Packed with Action

By

Daniel E. White, December 8, 2025

Walking with a high school student in Madera Canyon one day, I asked him what he likes about nature. He mentioned trees, bugs, plants, birds, large animals, lizards; about the only thing he did not mention was rocks. I followed up. "Are you considering majoring in something about nature in college?"

"I'm only a sophomore. I have time to think about that. I just like all the action I see when I look at nature." He then went on to tell me that his stepdad had aspired to create video games but ended up as a nurse. "You can never tell," the young man said.

A beaver building a dam; that would qualify as action in nature. So would a pride of lions collaborating to create lunch out of a gnu or a swarm of ants coming out of nowhere to cover a dying baby quail or a large insect. My hiking companion would have liked to spot more than the one deer we saw, but he had to settle for several varieties of butterflies and a flock of Mexican Blue Jays.

He noted, though, just how much action was probably taking place in the soil and grass along the trail, out of our view.

We passed a group of fourth graders being guided by Judy, in her role as a docent for the Education program hosted by the Friends of Madera Canyon. I am certain that she shared with her kids the galls she carried for show-and-tell and pointed out a praying mantis egg case. She likes to point out the number of ways that females of most species have worked out ways to protect their young while they mature, the galls and the mantis mansion being but two examples.

Those moms are performing their role in preserving their species. That's a common feature of nature in action, protecting the young so that they can mature and have their own offspring.

The plants and trees in our yard and the fence around it have provided us with chances to watch various species of birds build their nests, tend their eggs, feed their chicks and carry away what's left of the food the moms and dads have brought to the young ones that has not been digested. Periodically, all of the species disappear at once as the Cooper's Hawk makes its daily visit to our fence. When he goes, they come back. The work of preserving their species continues.

On the way home from the Canyon, I heard familiar lines from Simon and Garfunkel. They made more of an impact that day.

"I'd rather be a forest than a street. Yes, I would, if I could, I surely would.
I'd rather feel the earth beneath my feet. Yes, I would, if I could, I surely would."

Likely, I will not be offered the first option. If I were offered it, of course I would choose the living thing as opposed to the inanimate one, as useful as a street might be in moving people from place to place. And the reason for my choice would be feeling the earth beneath my feet.

We are all products of nature. So, isn't it logical that we would all opt for the earth beneath our feet rather than earth that has been covered over, stifling all life beneath? Maybe.

Our species, homo sapiens, seems always in action. In fact, there is so much action that besets our daily lives that the Sammy Davis lament, "Stop the world, I want to get on" seems a rational wish some days. The pace of our lives was fast even before the accelerants of technology.

So fast that we seldom have or take the time to think about preserving our species. I wonder how many kids have been conceived as a result of their parents consciously deciding to preserve the species? Sapiens have the capacity to decide to procreate or not in a way not available to other species.

My hiking buddy, in his thinking about action in nature, noted how some of the juvenile bugs we were no doubt passing would not make it to maturity, becoming a meal for another species instead. Nature seems to be a system, though, that when not disturbed, works out a balance between early life casualties and making it to reproducing so that all of its species survive. Birds and bugs and beavers don't seem to make conscious decisions about preserving their species. They just do.

Sapiens can care and cure. We can also kill and be cruel. Over time, having mastered fire and invented deadly weapons, sapiens has reached the top of the food chain, unless a mosquito carrying a lethal virus gets out of hand. (We can, with enough time, overcome them, too). Sapiens has had a hand in many species not being able to preserve their kind.

Sapiens has proved over and over in many ways that it can interfere with nature's systems and upset the balances it orders. At what point would such risky behavior threaten the preservation of our species?

I probably won't live long enough to worry about that point. My hiking friend might, or maybe his offspring.

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