

The War Between Cats and Skinks



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ON A MISTY MORNING NOT LONG ago, my wife and I were leaving Pine Island when we saw what looked like an alligator stretched out on the sidewalk. Curious, I pulled the car over, got out and approached him, slowly. When I got within a few feet of the reptile, I saw it wasn't an alligator—it was a lizard. A very large, dead lizard. And though I'd never seen one this close, I knew it was a monitor. From the point of its tapered nose to the tippy end of its tail, the monitor measured a good four feet.

mangrove wallows and, when water's near, the pine flats of Pine Island.

But all things considered, I am less nervous about loose monitors than I am about killer skinks.

That may sound silly, but I am not kidding.

Our cat almost died after eating a Southeastern five-lined skink. She came out OK, but suffered permanent nerve damage. The toxin in the skink damaged her internal gyroscope, as I like to call it.

A lot of vets I've talked to about skinks hesitate to call skinks toxic. Some say yes; most say no. There's very little scientific writing on skink poison, if in fact there even is such a thing.

Well, is there?

What an elegant creature it was, all flexible sinew and scaly hide.

When I told my dentist about the monitor, he told me how dangerous they are, how much the Cape is infested with their presence, and how alarmed citizens should be armed against the invaders. Does this sound dramatic? Well, let me say, he had reason to be.

Most of us already know that Nile monitors are not native to Florida. They came, most likely, from Africa, but after being deemed unwanted pets—they grow too fast!—these adaptable and rapacious predatory lizards moved into the mangrove-edged southwestern Cape as early as the 1990s. Today they are on Sanibel and Pine islands, and who knows where else. They swim well, eat well and obviously reproduce well. There are more than a thousand dwelling in canal burrows,

Many of us here on Pine Island—and I am definitely one—believe that skinks, when captured and eaten by cats, are certainly toxic.

Where to go from there?

Does the skink, as a defense mechanism, release a toxin that escapes the notice of the vets who examine captive, but not threatened, lizards for levels of toxicity? Skinks are often eaten by creatures in the wild to no ill effect. So why is it that cats should be so adversely affected when eating them?

I know of at least seven cases on the island where housecats ate skinks and got “lizard brains.” That’s the local term used to describe

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the way the cat walks drunkenly or wobbles its head from side to side after devouring a skink. Our own cat staggered, fell, and couldn’t get up. She cried pitifully, and we found her on a bed of stones in our garden, limp and paralyzed in the hindquarters. Her eyes rolled out of control.

Several months later, she recovered. But never completely. She still has trouble jumping even short distances.

Yesterday, while on the Internet, I found a blog by a distraught mom who’d written of a skink encounter with her family’s cat. When the cat acted sick, the woman rushed the

animal to the local emergency veterinarian. After thoroughly examining the cat, the vet told her that the feline had eaten a blue-tailed lizard. The blog went, “Aka, a skink, and the toxins from the lizard were blocking his nervous system in various ways. His extremities were not very functional and he was extremely out of balance.”

After her cat pulled through, however, the blogger wondered, “Do we let him back outside again? Maybe the trauma will be brought to mind when he sees another skink, and he’ll run the other direction. Who knows?”

Well, I do, the shadows do, and a couple of vets I know do.

Truth is, cats chatter and grow crazed when they see a skink. They want them that bad. (Some humans eat puffer fish, too, and some die from it—not often, but it happens).

I am reminded of our cat, who’s gone down the skink trail to unpleasant results so many times ... and yet nothing will stop her from doing so again except—Great Skink himself.

Yes, there is such a creature. He’s the granddaddy of living, skanking skinks, and as fate would have it, he lives like a lord of darkness in our very nondescript garage.

Our cat won’t go near this one. I saw Great Skink in the dark recesses just the other day—and she saw him, too. But she wouldn’t give chase even when he did his jitter dance across the cement floor.

Was it his admirable size?

The bigger the skink the mightier the poison?

What to say about the cat/skink controversy?

How I wish some worthy vet would weigh in and tell us more than we currently know. Dr. Robert Miller, the venerable vet on Pine Island, did say to me, “We used to think that skink toxicity was causing this problem with cats. But I don’t feel comfortable enough to say now that it’s skinks. It could be a kind of virus

that affects the inner ear. The name it's given is feline vestibular syndrome, and it affects outside cats rather than housecats who stay indoors."

Miller described the usual to me: "Some cats don't come home because they're so drunk. Usually this happens sometime in April or May, and usually, it wears off. Ten percent of cats go deaf from it. Some have a tilted head afterwards, but I think maybe they learn to compensate for the illness by learning how to jump differently."

I read of another vet who said, "Skinks may have toxin in them, but I can't prove it." Perhaps because, as he also added, "Skinks are too fast to catch."

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Miller said he saw a dead skink that his cat had killed, and it was not eaten. Did the cat get lizard brains? No, he told me. I said, "Maybe the skink doesn't secrete toxin until it's being eaten alive." Miller said he did not know whether that was true. It was possible, but not factual, he added.

The only truly toxic lizard in the United States is the Gila monster. The poison of the Gila monster, which is spread by chewing, not injecting, is under medical scrutiny as a possible cure for diabetes.

Now when I see Kit Kat walking funny, I have to ask myself what mystic medicines may be buried in arcane reptilian toxins? What secret blessings may be conferred from lowly skinks to lizard-brained cats? We'll probably never know ... but, as they say, what doesn't kill you makes you, if not stronger, at least wiser. †

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