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Natural History Study Area

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MACALESTER  
COLLEGE

located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

"PREDATION PRESSURE" at ORDWAY.

The October winds and sporadic rains had been doing things to the colorful cloak the woods had been wearing for several weeks. So many leaves had blown away or had been weighted down by the pelting of the autumn drizzles that there was improved visibility in the oak forest. It was on such an autumn day that I performed a small favor for a student who was otherwise occupied and unable to attend to the live-traps he had set out for study of small forest mammals.

It was almost noon when I went into the woods and my foray coincided with the first drops of the drizzling rain which had been building up during the forenoon. The immediate effect on me was that I became soaking wet; in addition it was very difficult to inscribe notes in the steady rain.

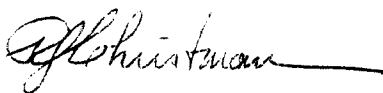
Each of the traps had been baited with a small blob of peanut butter, usually very enticing to small rodents. At the second trap I observed that the lure of peanut butter did not stop with small rodents. A trap had been dismantled, i.e. the two pieces, one of which telescopes into the other, had been separated. Now this requires a little doing and is usually a two-handed job for a human. However, here lay the pieces, separated. My first reaction was that vandalism had been the cause- human vandalism, that is; but then I observed that the peanut butter was gone. A vandal who likes peanut butter? Very interesting! Of the next five traps two had been similarly dismantled and the other three had been disarrayed, one of them having had the peanut butter pulled out through the open end of the trap. Furthermore, the acts seemed almost as if they had been carried out by a creature with hands and I thought of raccoons. However, they had gone into their winter dormancy by this time and so I very much doubted that it was their little, long-toed and sensitive paws which had violated the traps even though their omnivorous appetites would have dearly loved the peanut butter bait.

Satisfied that Homo sapiens was not involved in this particular vandalism I still had to conclude that it was a larger, stronger creature than any of the Mice or Shrews we had been capturing in the traps. Seeking to discover the culprit and even more important to remove this upsetting factor in the student's study I set a large live-trap and waited.

The drizzly weather turned to snow and the temperatures dropped. Three mornings later the large live-trap contained the culprit - a large Gray Squirrel. He was dead, the result of sub-freezing temperatures but also, I am inclined to thin, of his hyper-energetic makeup. I believe that his frenetic efforts to get out of the trap precipitated his death - perhaps a heart attack.

That was the end of the depredation.

March 16, 1981

  
R. J. CHRISTMAN,  
Naturalist