

DON'T BLINK: WHEN WILDLIFE SUDDENLY APPEARS, IT CAN LEAVE JUST AS QUICKLY



Last spring, after noticing a long, white tube beneath a backyard palm, I knelt in the shrubbery for a closer look. What

I discovered was

a discarded snake skin, its surface eerily translucent, like a ghost of the winter just passed. I'm not a thin man, and the snake's shedded coat seemed lengthy enough to circle my waist. Naturally, I wondered about the creature who had left it behind. Was that big snake still nearby, growing even bigger?

I got a likely answer a few days later while Larry, who helps us with yard chores, was outside with me as we pruned one of our Drake elms. We were discussing our children, a favorite topic, when a streak of black at the corner of my eye directed me toward the ground a couple of feet away. A large, black snake – one just as long as the molted skin I'd found – had appeared near the brush pile we'd made of freshly cut limbs.

I wasn't scared, but our visitor got my attention, as snakes inevitably do. As if memorizing the license plate of a car poised to speed away, I took a mental

Wild creatures come and go on a schedule we don't choose, often vanishing as quickly as they appear. And in nature, there's no rewind button.

snapshot. The snake was blue-black with a light, licorice sheen, its back freckled with the kind of random yellow spots Jackson Pollock might have splattered across a canvas.

I glanced toward our living room window, hoping my wife, who's fascinated by snakes, might have happened to look out to see the spectacle, too. She wasn't around, and as I returned my attention to the lawn, I realized the snake was no longer around, either. It had vanished in an instant. If Larry had not been there to see the snake, I might have doubted seeing it at all.

Later, I flipped through my field guide to learn what I'd seen, an exercise that's always a little like scanning a rogue's gallery at the police precinct. There I found a positive ID – a speckled king snake, which is common in my part of the world and a welcome predator of mice and rats.

What I'll never find common is the speed with which wild things can fade from sight. Nature documentaries, which are carefully edited to create the illusion of limitless intimacy, condition us to think of the wild as a package of cable channels, all available for viewing with a casual click.

But in the actual world, other species come and go on a schedule we don't choose, a humbling reminder that for all our hubris, humanity doesn't control every flight, flicker, and slither around us.

Which is why the next time I see a speckled king snake, I'll try not to blink.

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