

THE FISHER'S CATCH

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(1) The food chain is long and complex: a predator preys on one type of animal which has been, in its turn, predator to several other animals. This constant cycle usually operates both widely and smoothly. However, in some rare cases, an animal is suited to its environment so well that it has defeated every predator except one, a predator which, in turn, is so well adapted in body and behavior that it rarely eats anything except this single prey. One of these rare cases of behavioral and bodily adaptations occurs between two animals called the porcupine and the fisher.

(2) Everyone has heard of the porcupine, a quiet animal which eats the bark of trees and has quills sharp enough to discourage most predators; however, few people have heard of its one arch-enemy, the fisher. This animal looks rather like a weasel, long and slender with brown or black fur. Several protective devices aid it in the capture of its principal meal, the porcupine. It has a very sturdy skin which stops most of the porcupine's quills. When a quill does get caught, a special body fluid of the fisher makes the end of the quill soft so that it can be pulled out easily. If a quill should lodge within the body, a capsule of this fluid will form round it and dissolve it. Although the porcupine has many defenses, such as climbing a tree or going into a secure den, the fisher can usually get him away from the tree and is usually the winner in any struggle.

(3) Before dawn, the fisher crawls groggily out of his burrow, sniffs the air, and looks around. Seeing no immediate signs of a meal, he begins to forage in a straight line. He keeps going in this line looking for signs until he sees small tracks on the ground and notices the sure sign of the porcupine's presence, bark stripped from a nearby oak. As he moves further on down the trail, he finally picks up the scent. The odor gets stronger and stronger until at last he breaks into a small clearing with a freshly-stripped tree and a sleeping porcupine in its lower branches. Quickly the fisher slips back into the brush, for he must wait. If the porcupine were to discover his presence now, all would be lost. Just as the sun comes up, the porcupine awakens and starts down the tree. Now the battle will begin.

(4) The fisher moves like a shadow toward the tree that had sheltered the porcupine. Just as the porcupine

reaches the middle of the clearing, he tenses as he catches the scent of the hungry fisher. The porcupine heads back to the tree, knowing it is his best defense, but his way is cut off by the eager fisher, who jumps from behind the tree with a cry of sensed victory. Realizing his danger, the porcupine makes a dash for the brush, but is again cut off by the quickly-moving fisher. Trying to use his last defense, the porcupine bristles his quills as the fisher begins to circle him. But the predator forces his prey to face him while he rakes its short, vulnerable nose and face with his sharp claws. Its eyes blinded by fresh blood and its whole face smashed, the porcupine makes a final but futile attempt to hurt the invader with his tail. It hits the fisher, but with no effect. As the fisher turns him over, the porcupine finally succumbs. After ripping the soft underbelly open, the fisher eats his way into the carcass. An hour later he crawls out of the empty skin, cleans himself, and walks away, well-satisfied and confident that he will be able to survive the coming day.