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## Animals will be animals

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Intro: Camera close-ups of nature and animal life tell us more than we may have expected, but now that we are hooked, we may learn as much good as there seems to be bad.

It should not come as a surprise to anyone to learn that life for most insects and animals on planet Earth is an exceedingly tough affair, and yet it somehow manages to go on taking the breath away with almost every new camera close-up that comes to light.

In a sense, our understanding of exactly how nasty, brutish, and short life can be in the natural world is in an infant state. Until comparatively recent times it was just something we humans knew, probably instinctively, without it being full on, and in the face, all the time. Things changed when we started taking pictures. Focusing on one creature after another, at first in the name of scientific investigation, but later in various forms of unashamed curiosity, the pictures became more and more fascinating and so much more deadly. Now capturing the life stories of our fellow creatures has become big business, and remarkable equipment is available to find out exactly what happens around the clock underwater, in the air, and certainly above and underground. We can virtually share the life of anything that has one. Call it CCTV if you will, or spying, or searching for life's most secret stories, this is a field that has certainly got the firm attention of a very large audience indeed. You can scarcely open a magazine, or a laptop or tablet without bumping into a gripping example of nature at its most illuminating, and sometimes shocking.

On one of the many social channels recently there was a short clip of a most unusual animal story. Without music to spoil it, no voice to detract from the stunning visual experience, there before our eyes is a small green snake looking at a snail making its way on a bright green leaf in a jungle somewhere. The two are separated by no more than an inch, and the snake appears to be battling to identify the creature ahead, which is as a matter of fact its favourite food. After what seems an age with its head cocked and trying to focus, the snake moves even closer. The snail, meanwhile, has sensed the danger and is careful not to move even the tiniest muscle. A flash and a green blur later and the snail has been dragged out of its shell and swallowed piecemeal, leaving only a small pool of slime to mark its passing, and even that soon disappears as the snake spots it and quickly sucks up every last drop of it. Nutrients, it seems, are not to be wasted.

The vast African national parks and game reserves are the most productive for this kind of interaction, and because the continent's animals include many of the biggest, the wildest and the most brutal, this is surely the place to take your camera or box of recording tricks. If you are lucky you might come across a spectacular three-some like one photographer did a short while ago.

What the cameraman saw on a dusty African footpath that caused him to hit the record button was a python tightly coiled around some unidentified furry creature, trying to squeeze the life out of it and looking ever so likely to succeed. Enter a pair of jackals, bent on stealing the reptile's meal. They approach with caution, yet with enough menace to distract the snake. It tries to fight off their snippy snapping jaws and keep tight control of its victim at the same time. Their intervention proves just enough for the victim to break loose. It's an African Honey Badger, a fascinating creature of some intellect and great strength.

The badger breaks loose from the python's coils, but is far from discouraged or out of breath from its narrow shave. Now, no doubt seeing the chunky reptile rather more as a hearty meal than a menace, it goes after it with sharp teeth and an even sharper brain, darting in and out, now snapping at the snake, now turning to fight off the still interested jackals. The fight continues, but in the face of the badger's aggression the jackals soon give up. The snake expires and is dragged off to cover by the limping and somewhat puzzled victor, looking for all the world like a prizefighter pleased to have won the match but not entirely sure how he pulled it off.

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As with the snail story, there is much to learn from this surprisingly long cut, and it is not all sad and gloomy. For most viewers, the spunky badger quickly establishes himself as the hero of the piece because he won't give up and run away while he can. The jackals, being jackals, are the clear villains of course, while the poor python is just the unlucky loser, beaten by the roll of the dice.

If these are not appetisers enough to get you clicking your mouse, how about 'Three Crocodiles and Twelve Wild Dogs', 'The Eagle and the Hare', 'Komodo Dragon Swallows Warthog Whole', 'The Lion and The Unfortunate Zebra', 'Sad End for Rikki Tikki Tavi' – there is no end to this growing library of real wildlife. You could watch a spider make its own web, hide out of sight waiting for visitors, wrap a fly in silk, and get eaten by its mate.

But best of all, naturally speaking, are those clips which show that there is a better, more hopeful side to the usual order of dog eat dog. There are only a few, far fewer than we might wish, but there are already enough to make us re-think some of our assumptions about the span of animal intellect and the range of interests of creatures great and small. Do they worry? Do they care? Do they recognise what we call trouble when they see other creatures in difficulty? Is there any sympathy in the jungle? Are there nasty individuals and nice ones too? Yes, it seems some do worry, some do care, some will reach out to help, some may even risk their lives for others, and we are getting the pictures to prove it.

The most common examples of such animal altruism captured on film fall into the class of 'life-saving' or 'helping hands', and they include several shots of hippos saving various other animals from certain death by crocodiles, swimmers struggling at sea being assisted by dolphins, and buffaloes beating off attacks on their fellows by lions.

Yes, they are few, but a few more are added every month, and as we get to know more and more about the creatures who share space with us, so we hope to confirm that if they aren't all very nice people, they aren't all just callous killers either.