

Never again

It all happened when I was two years old, in my prime, strong, bold, foolish, verging on reckless.

I was sunning myself on the ledge of my basking rock, high above the West Highland Way, overlooking Craigallian Loch.

I was replete, full of voles and newly sprung froglets, dozing, hovering in that dream-space found early on July mornings when the sun is already high and walkers and their dogs are still absent.

The smell of something sweet and warm drifted into my nostrils, reminding me of cows.

I wriggled, stretched and settled to enjoy the imagined taste.

The "goo-goo" sound of a human child was unfamiliar.

Until then I had only heard adults chattering their way along the path, unaware of me above them, watching. I have never liked humans. Most are loudmouthed, noisy, some even carrying ghetto blasters, unable to appreciate the calming sounds of nature.

To get a better view of the source of this new sound and taste, I scaled my rock to its summit and peered back down the path towards them.

Camped under a tree, the young couple were sitting cross-legged beside a small tent sizzling bacon and sausages on a stove. The door of the tent was open and inside was a child strapped in a carry seat, holding a bottle, sucking milk. The scent filled my nostrils, tantalizing my tastebuds.

The man was talking in a low drone about fishing. The woman was not listening to him. She was talking to the child about swallows and martins.

I watched and waited. They finished their breakfast.

He went off with a spinning rod to steal fish from Craigallian Loch. She followed, just a few steps then stopped and raised binoculars to watch an osprey hunting for her breakfast.

When I arrived inside the tent, the child was asleep, the bottle on the groundsheet, its teat dripping.

My fangs bit hard into the teat. The taste was delicious.

A sharp pain followed. I reared up to see a small brown, wire-haired dog gripping my tail in its sharp teeth. I was thrown high in the air.

The mutt was barking. The woman was screaming. The child was screeching. The man was running towards me, cursing loudly.

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The dog sprang forward, leaving me no choice.

I bit into its neck aiming just below its ear. I clung on until it sagged and slumped to the ground. I let go and began to slide away.

The man fired a rock at me. It hit my head. I saw a knife flash in his hand but by that time I was deep in the bracken, hidden.

That was two years ago.

Now I slither along with a damaged tail, one eye permanently shut.

I have learned my lesson.

Adders must stay well clear of humans.

And dogs.