

## A snake in the grass

Elizabeth Shove

'Look, over there. At the edge of the path just by that tuft of heather. Can you see it?'. Adam swung the huge camera around on its camouflaged tripod. They'd been out on the heath for four days now and this was the first sign of reptilian life.

The subject had decided to take a snooze in exactly the right location. The audio sensors were pinned to a tree close by. Adam put his headphones on and waited. He picked up the faintest sound of coils and scales adjusting in the hot sun. He trained the camera on the snake and admired the distinctive black and white markings. A large male adder in the prime of life.

*It was such a nice day I went to my favourite spot. Damn. It's them. I hissed gently. Just as I was getting comfortable. I flicked my tongue again, oscillating it to test the air, yes - definitely their smell - no doubt about it. Adam and his bossy producer, Eve. They know to be quiet, but it is easy to detect them and all their fancy TV gear. Invading our privacy.*

*They've been around for something like four days, and no one knows what to do. Should we put on a show and get it over with? Should we carry on as normal? Or should we keep out of the way? Trevor, who lives the other side of the heath said he could pop over and we could pretend to fight over the chance to mate. We'd do our standard snake dance, and that would be that. With luck, Adam would then pack up and leave us in peace.*

*I took a deep breath. The air filled the long thin lungs that run down the length of my body. I drew in my ribs and grumpily slithered out of sight.*

Eve came over to the camera. 'Did you get it?' She asked. 'That one is sure to be back: it looks like a favourite spot.' The next day it rained heavily, and again the day after that as well. Finally, the sun came out, the temperature rose, and Adam returned to the sandy path at the edge of the heath. Shortly after noon, there was slight movement in the grass.



*I knew he'd be back. I'd had a word with Trevor and Vicky we'd agreed to play a trick. We'd tempt him for a day or two and then treat him to a fake snake dance. We'd make it look like Trevor and I were fighting over Vicky. No one would know we were just fooling around. Serve him right for disturbing our patch.*

Adam's note book:

Thursday, 6am. Went back to the woods and set the camera up by the sandy path at the edge of the heather. Nothing happened. 12.18 – a large male adder appeared and made for the resting place. I let the camera roll. 14.06. A female appeared, and then disappeared.

No more action for the rest of the day.

Friday. A female came into view 15.04. Disappeared 15.07

Eve left for London. Adam knew she was anxious. She had not planned for so many days filming and unless they got some really good footage in the next day or so, they'd have nothing to show. Adam didn't share her obsession with viewing figures and budgets. True it took time, and true it was unpredictable, but for Adam that was the price you had to pay if you wanted to show the natural world as it really was.

*We waited for Adam to arrive. Now that Eve has gone, he doesn't get here so early. Once he settled in, we decided it was time to make our move. Vicky came out first and pretended to doze. A few moments later I appeared and flicked my tongue over her scales. She stifled a giggle. We carried on like this for a while, pretending to be courting. We could smell Adam's sweat.*

*Eventually Trevor slithered into view. Vicky and I turned, guiltily, as if we'd been caught in the act. I raised my head and advanced towards the fake intruder. Trevor didn't back off. We were ready to dance. We wound ourselves around each other and embarked on what looked like a trial of strength. Vicky watched in admiration. Trev and I wrestled on, grinning as only snakes know how. That's enough, I hissed. And I slunk away leaving the two of them alone.*

Adam was ecstatic. He called Eve right away. 'Yes, I got two of them fighting for the female. The shots are superb, the light was excellent, and the males did battle in a patch of open ground. They couldn't have done better if they'd tried. It was perfect. Exactly what we wanted!'

That night, in the hotel room, Adam checked the sound recording. 'Psst, Vicky, lie still, he's watching'. Then a female voice: 'I can't lie still, behave yourself, you are tickling me something rotten'. The male replied: 'Trev will be here in a moment, if you laugh your coils will tighten up. We've got to make it look natural'. A moment later the male spoke again. 'Ah, Trev, great to see you. Perfect timing.' The female had a definite lisp. 'Over to you two now and don't forget we need a good show: act as if you were on TV'. There was some background noise and then: 'Cheerio Trev. Thanks for coming over. And Vicky, that was superb. You deserve an Oscar. I'm sure they'll clear off now. Catch up with you soon.'

The video was perfectly synchronised with the audio. If the sensors had caught the snakes talking and if they were to be believed, they'd put on the whole performance for his benefit. There was nothing authentic about it at all.

What now? Should he tell Eve that they'd been duped by a trio of crafty snakes? He knew she wouldn't care. They had the images in the can, and that's all that mattered for the audience figures she craved.

Adam sat back on the uncomfortable hotel chair and gazed at the standard-issue art on the Travel Lodge wall. It was a huge, tinted photograph of an apple tree laden with fruit. That wasn't real either.

He hissed in annoyance. Nothing, but nothing, was what it seemed.