



SHORT STORY

Rumours of a panther roaming East Finchley inspired cat lover David Hobbs...

Panther of Suburbia

From here I can see forever, or at least the forever that is London. It sprawls before me, visible through the haze and frames by the arch of an old railway bridge as if an image plucked from the pages of a Sunday supplement.

Yet here the city is both distant and all-enveloping. Its sounds of traffic and commotion are submerged beneath the chitter-chatter of birds, the whine of the power drill and the distant, but soaring voice of a soprano practising scales. This is the suburbs and here, between the garden fence and the railway line, is the real urban jungle, for this is the land of the panther, the land of the large black cat.

The land is not much to look at. It is nothing more than a wasteland of dead fridges and broken-down beds, but it is where the panther has made his home.

Here he stalks mice, snatches fledglings from flight, but mostly makes his stand when those who would dispute his claim to be king choose to challenge him. The laws of the jungle make for a tough life and the panther knows that all power resides in the paws of the winner.

Cat walk

For the losers the panther has nothing but contempt as they scuttle away at his approach. Yet even losers have victories and, to a defeated, one-time champion, an extra breakfast or the warmth of a fire is a triumph to be savoured. Not, of course, that the jungle is their home, they know that the panther rules the jungle and they must beware when they venture into his domain.

They are not the only ones who fear the panther. On high branches sit the worried and the frightened in the knowledge that

the ground is a dangerous place. Pigeons sleep uneasily lest the 'black ghost' descends on them at night and pray for salvation to their gods as they await the dawn.

The panther does not care. He knows his power, his position and his strength. He also knows the risks he runs and has such scars from close shaves as to almost deny him his double life as a drawing-room favourite. He doesn't mind, he is the master of all that he surveys in the jungle. He does not need any helping hands, for he is king in his world. This is only right and proper. Here in the Norman's land between the garden fence and the railway line the panther is special and because he is special he is king. Yet this is not his doing, merely a non-doing that has left him unique, a complete cat and father to many. Here he is king, until dinner time.

Any reader who feels strongly about any matter is invited to use this "Soapbox" column. Please note that opinions expressed are those of the writer alone.



Hot weather and litter go hand-in-hand. We stroll the streets in shorts and T-shirts, sipping from our can of drink as we soak up the sun. And then what? Well, we in East Finchley are lucky. As well as litter bins along the High Road, there are litter bins at the tube station. However, elsewhere on the tube network, particularly in Central London, there's not a litter bin to be seen.

Try as I might, it's not always easy to put an empty drink can into a bag with a newspaper in it - there's always a bit at the end that can't be sucked up by a straw or won't be shaken out of the tin and yet it's enough to make a huge mess at the bottom of the bag!

Times have changed. Thankfully, no-one worries about bombs at tube stations anymore, so why haven't the litter bins been returned? Anyone who remembers the fire at King's Cross tube station will recall that cigarette stubs and other litter blown underneath the escalators fed the flames and turned a minor incident into a tragedy.

Although smoking was banned, the continued absence of litter bins at tube stations has - to my mind - meant that the threat of another major fire at a tube station remains. I am now writing to London Underground to ask them when will they put their litter bins back onto the platforms. If you feel the same, then I am sure they will be pleased to hear from you.

Katerina Pasternak.

NATURE NOTES

Duck's tale by R.E. Mack

A group of people were watching a duck on the lake at Kenwood, paddling furiously to escape a large Labrador. As they could not understand why the duck did not simply fly away, I was able to show off by pointing to a group of small ducklings (able to swim, but too young to fly) in the opposite direction. The duck was cleverly drawing the dog away from them.

The tenacity (and bravery) with which creatures defend their young is well-known. Birds which nest on the ground use the 'trailing wing' technique, feigning injury, to draw intruders away from the nest. Lapwings swoop menacingly, whilst some sea-birds can inflict nasty wounds; and never get between a cow and its calf, or approach a sitting swan.

Most people will have observed parent birds flying to and from the nest all day, taking food to the young. Even when the chicks are out of the nest and on the lawn, the parents will still care for them ceaselessly.

Puffin blow

Yet this slavish devotion to the young ends abruptly, even brutally. PUFFINS, which raise their young in underground burrows, simply fly off to sea one day; the youngsters are driven by hunger to emerge into a hostile and strange world.

GUILLEMOTS, which nest on ledges on the cliff face, leave their single chick before it can fly (although it can swim). The chicks have to hurl themselves in the direction of the sea, some of them perishing on the rocks. Sheep will drive away a juvenile seeking nurture with a well-aimed kick.

Some birds and animals do stay together in family or larger groups for considerable periods (usually bigger creatures who take longer to mature), but it is normal to drive away and totally ignore the young once they can fend for themselves. Morality does not enter into the matter. Creatures have an overpowering urge to preserve their genes by procreating, and go to great lengths to achieve this end. Once achieved, the matter is ended.

No worries about noisy and unco-operative teenagers!

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

The Archer is re-launching this section as part of the expansion of its services to the East Finchley community.

Now, however, advertising in this section is absolutely free to any private resident of N2. Sorry, businesses, you will have to pay but only at the rate of 50p per line - unless you place a job advertisement which is always free.

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