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The front page of the May 17th edition of the San Angelo daily newspaper ran a picture of a deputy in Fort Stockton holding a Nile monitor lizard most likely born of parents from South Africa. So the story goes, the officer found the lizard underneath a lumberyard where he'd been hiding after being abandoned by a carnival group in March.

Meter deposit at the Chamber of Commerce helped the sheriff's department find the owner. However, by the time they located the carnival hand, he was in California out of reach of whatever regulations, if any, govern willfully abandoning Nile monitor lizards under lumberyards in Fort Stockton, Texas.

The guy cleaning my house threw the paper away before I clipped the story. I remember the lizard was four feet long and suffering from dehydration. Fort Stockton is west of the Pecos River. So you don't need a clipping of a lost Nile monitor lizard story to know he is going to be suffering from dehydration unless he hid in a sewer pipe, and I have already told you he was under a lumberyard.

*Grolier's Encyclopedia* wasn't much more helpful than the house cleaner who threw out the newspaper. The "M" section reads: "Nile monitor lizards live in South Africa. They lay their eggs on termite hills. Heat from hills decaying incubates the eggs." I already knew the fierce Komodo dragon, the largest monitor in the world, and by far the meanest beast on earth, laid her eggs up on a megapod

bird's nest for the same reason. (Megapods are a large chicken-like bird. Their claws grow long to build a huge nest of tree limbs trashy enough to make a pack rat's home look like he's been studying basket weaving. Megapods nest on the ground and roost in trees, ranking them only a few notches above the monitor's on the scale of motherhood. At least megapods don't eat their young like monitor lizards do.)

In early spring, a spell of rattlesnakes hit here much worse than collecting run-away carnival lizards. Old grass and new growth in the yard reached such proportions, I had to mow around the house to be able to even see a snake. Running a mower in snake country takes a careful eye and steady hand on the throttle. Experienced gardeners refuse to work out of town. High school kids are too sleepy-headed to turn loose until the grass has been cut a few times. Fellow on the north side of San Angelo gives good money for rattlesnake skins, but he won't give a dime for one run over by a power mower.

On the fourth or fifth round of my mowing, a snakeskin lying by an old flower bed caused me to veer 12 feet off course and barely miss a hydrant. Thirty-five feet farther around the house, a medium-sized rattlesnake raced into a big clump of horehound.

Self protection and protection of property goes back to my greatest of great grandmothers. Once when she was up late watching for Comanches, the grandfather clock she brought to

Texas from Mississippi as a wedding gift stopped ticking from a rattlesnake coiled around the striker. Being unwilling to shoot her clock, she clamped the snake in a set of fireplace tongs and hurled him into the fire, filling her cabin, I feel sure, with the pungency of roasting rattler.

But unlike Granny, I didn't reach for tongs; I rushed inside for my shotgun. Before the south side of the yard was cut, two much larger snakes crawled out from under the house right into the path of the mower. By then my nerves reached such high pitch, I was dodging the shadows from the netwire fence and cutting crisscross swaths more like a runaway mower instead of a guided one. Perhaps gripping the control bar too tight, or cutting the wheels too short, or both, brought the machine to a sputtering halt, choked down by its own fumes.

The lawnmower shop in San Angelo promised to have it running in 10 days. Having no other choice, I returned home and used the sidewalk. On day five after the lawnmower quit, I turned in this desk chair to find a rattlesnake coiled by the end of a roll-top desk. Cut off from a broom or shovel, I scarred the office baseboard chunking paperweights and ash trays at the snake. As soon as my breathing abated, I called a yard man to come out from Mertzon to cut the rest of the grass.

Counting the yard work and mower repair, I am one hundred and fifty bucks in the hole clearing off an opening around the house. Anytime I walk outside I never notice

whether it's cloudy or not. I never take my eyes off the ground. First thing I do in the morning is pull on my boots. Shadows around this office look mighty threatening.