

Baby Darter's Adventure

Deep beneath lush green palms and bright colorful tropical flowers lives lizard Johnny Darter and his family; Cindy Darter and their little one, Baby Darter. Baby was short, dark and stocky like his Dad, with a light stripe down his back; the same pale color of his Mom. Although, Cindy had a crooked tail, a reminder of when Sam Snake almost caught her. Johnny was a mottled brown with a bright red flap under his chin (called a dewlap) which he would display to anyone threatening his family.



Oh there were plenty of other lizards residing in that same area, but everyone got along with each other. Each family staked out a territory in which they would hunt for food; primarily roaches and spiders. Younger lizards like Baby feasted on aphids, tiny pear-shaped insects that cluster on leaves and stems of plants. They are an especially tasty treat for little lizards.

Johnny and Cindy would often run up a nearby down spout to get a better look at their neighborhood from the rooftop, leaving little Baby to stay hidden in a thick shrub until they return. From this high perch, the couple could see all the activity



in the neighborhood. **Margie Morningdove** would often fly over from a nearby rooftop to join them. Considered by all the lizards in the neighborhood as their protector, Margie would warn them of pending danger and was always there to help them in any way she could. Together, the threesome watched the antics of Ned and Nadine Squirrel with their twins Nate and Nadia,

scampering through the fronds on the big palm tree they called home. The Squirrel family was all very unpleasant and, to everyone's relief, they stayed pretty much to themselves.

Every morning a flock of white Ibis would descend on the neighborhood to search for worms and bugs in the thick St. Augustine grass; pecking at the ground with their long slender beaks. With their poor eyesight, they would peck and peck blindly in the grass; amazingly actually catching a tasty morsels!

Then there was **Sam Snake** to watch out for. A long slender black snake, he slithered silently through the grass and shrubs searching for food. Since Margie usually warned everyone of his approach, Sam often had to make do with whatever bugs he could find.



Sometimes Baby, hiding out in the azalea bush, would overhear Greta Grasshopper talking to the lizards that live in the hedge. Greta is a very chatty grasshopper, talking on and on about things going on around the neighborhood. Sometimes, she has something interesting to say, but usually it's mostly gossip.

One day, while Johnny, Cindy and Margie were on the rooftop, little Baby Darter, preoccupied with spying on a palmetto bug lumbering past the bush and into the grass, followed the bug far from his home. Unaware of how far he had wandered, Baby continued to follow the bug between grass blades, over mole mounds, and around ant hills. When Sam Snake suddenly appeared out of nowhere to scoop up the palmetto bug, it gave Baby such a fright! Lucky for Baby, the young sleek snake had been so focused on the bug's movements; he didn't see Baby following a short distance away.



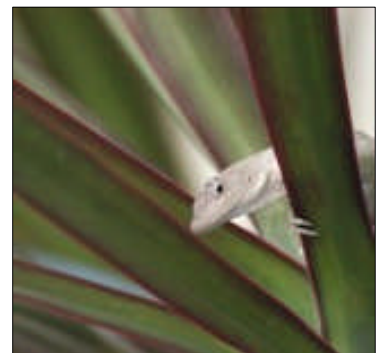
Long after Sam had slithered away, Baby continued to sit absolutely still, his little heart racing with fear and holding his breath until he felt sure that Sam was gone. But before he had a chance to move again, a long pointed beak hammered down through the ground, sending little pellets of earth spraying out, surprising Baby. "What . . .?" gulped Baby as he looked up to see, far beyond the long slender beak, a huge white bird with beady little red eyes. "Oops, sorry, I didn't

see you there." said **Abby Ibis**. "My eyesight's not so good. I thought you were a worm." Baby remembered often seeing flocks of these strange-looking birds poking through the thick St. Augustine grass back home; but never from this close. It was quite frightening!

Just as a strange whirring sound began to be heard in the distance, Greta Grasshopper went flying overhead shouting out "It's coming! It's coming! Everyone out of the way! Danger! Danger!" And just as quickly, the grasshopper was gone. While Baby wondered what all the shouting was about, that whirring sound was getting steadily louder and louder. He began to sense the danger was fast approaching but what was it, what should he do?

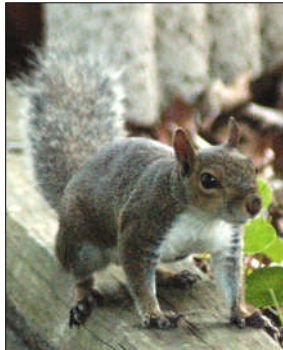
By now, the sound was deafening and birds were flying off in a whoosh; grasshoppers and crickets were fleeing; moles darting into their holes. What was going on? What was coming?

In a moment, with the sound roaring all around, Baby could feel the ground shake and a great wind began tugging on the grasses. The suction became so strong that Baby had to hang on tight to the base of a grass blade and, even then, the suction pulled his little body up until his tail was almost straight up. The huge lawnmower was directly above the little lizard but, lucky for him, only the very tops of the thick grass got cut by the whirling sharp blades. After what seemed like a very long time, the lawnmower finally passed followed by the man's big feet.



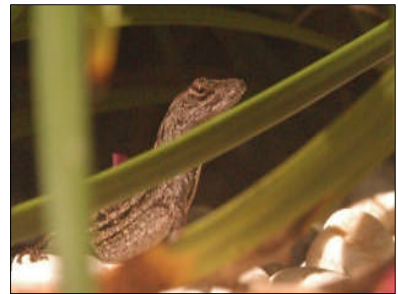
Baby scurried away hurriedly but worried that he may be going further away from home. The tangle of grass clippings created a canopy above the tiny lizard, making it hard to see beyond. Not sure where he was heading, Baby continued on until he came upon the roots of a big old Magnolia tree. Baby hopped up onto the closest root to get above the grass and see what was around, like his Mom and Dad do on the rooftop.

No sooner did he get above the grass then **Ned Squirrel** ran past him, almost knocking Baby back to the ground. "Outta my way!" growled Ned, soon followed by Nadine as they scampered up the Magnolia tree. It was a good thing that Baby



held on tight to the root because Nate and Nadia soon followed, their twitching furry tails almost sweeping Baby from his perch. In a moment, they were gone, disappearing into thick shiny magnolia leaves and fragrant white blossoms. They used the sprawling tree branches to hop onto the nearby palm trees where they nested.

Exhausted and hungry, Baby just wanted to go home and be with his Mom and Dad. But for now he knew he had to find someplace safe to hide. Quickly exploring the tangled roots at the base of the tree, Baby found a little cave-like niche to curl up into. Hidden in the shadows, he began to relax and soon was drifting off to sleep.



Oh the images that Baby dreamed up. Images of all the creatures he had encountered that day;

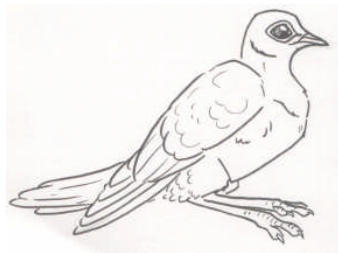


Ned Squirrel growling at him fiercely,

Sam Snake slinking through his mind,



and even **Abby Ibis** appeared menacing.



As a matter of fact, everyone the frightened little lizard dreamed about appeared mean and scary.

Why, even **Margie Morningdove** didn't look like herself!

And then Baby saw his Dad in his dream with Margie, both looking strange. "Baby Darter, Baby Darter!" they called, tugging at him. "Wake up, Baby Darter, wake up!"

Suddenly awakened, he realized it wasn't a dream anymore. His Dad was tugging on him to pull him out of the shadows, with Margie flitting around overhead. "My goodness, Baby, you must have been really tired to sleep so sound. We've been looking for you all day.



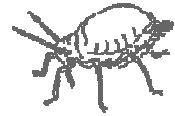
"Oh, Daddy!" Baby cried and nuzzled up to Johnny Darter. "I couldn't find my way back home and was so scared and lost." Then Baby told them all about his encounters with Sam Snake, Abby Ibis, the huge lawnmower, and the Squirrel family. "Baby, you did the right thing by finding a safe hiding place until we could find you," his Dad told him. "But now you know why we tell you to stay close by us and not wander off."

On the way home, Johnny Darter told his weary son how he was able to find him. It seems that when he and Cindy returned from the roof to discover their son missing, Johnny called out to Margie to help find the little guy. Together they searched all day. Abby Ibis told Margie where she came upon him. Greta Grasshopper had barely noticed the tiny lizard in the grass, but told Johnny how she had warned everybody about the lawnmower's approach. Of course, talkative Greta started to tell Johnny every detail about the event, but Johnny hurried on saying he had to find Baby and had no time to talk.

While Margie was questioning the Squirrel family in their palm tree nest, she happened to look down and saw the sleeping lizard tucked into the Magnolia tree roots. "Over here, Johnny Darter, under the Magnolia tree," she called out, flying down to perch on the roots.

"Gosh, Daddy," murmured little Baby upon hearing the story, "I'm sure glad you found me. I thought I would never see you again!"

When they reached home under the azalea bush, Cindy Darter rushed to greet her little baby. "I missed you so much. Please don't ever wander away like that again," she scolded. Then, "I'll bet you're hungry, Little One." Baby



nodded quickly as he gobbled up the **aphids** Mom offered him. And so Baby Darter's adventure that day came to a close with the little lizard promising never to wander off again. He knew that when he gets older, he'll be expected to go off to find his own place. But, for now, he was just glad to be safe again with his family.



THE END

Story and Photographs By Sharyn K. Germ