

# The Recognition of Change Blindness

Recently I had a traumatic and life changing experience. I was building a shelter along our fence to store firewood for the winter, dutifully absorbed in my work. While using a table saw to rip a long board into narrow strips, the board fell off the stand and threw my hand back into the saw blade. The end of my right thumb disappeared faster than I could think.

The wound was nicely sewn and now is pretty well healed. It's still sensitive but that will diminish over time. In recent days I've been thinking a lot about how much I wish the accident hadn't happened; according to my doctor, that's part of the grieving process over my loss. There are two obvious lessons from this event. The first one is for carpenters: ALWAYS use a push stick when using a table saw. The second one is more general: Things change and changes are often permanent. What I've been thinking about is no matter how much we might wish that change won't happen, change is inexorable.



The deepest denial of change is probably the refusal to accept mortality. The logical part of our brain might know that youth passes into old age and old age leads to the end of life. These are inevitable changes that most of us just don't think about on a daily basis. I am one of those who believes, like the great evolutionary geneticist, Theodosius Dobzhansky, that the ability to ignore mortality is a part of our fundamental neural hard wiring that has evolved by natural selection. Whether or not this is true, the fact remains that humans have an enormous capacity to be blind to change.

One example is the refusal of many to accept the existence of global warming. Global warming is not like a single event that happens, such as an earthquake which, once it has happened, leaves clear evidence that it has occurred and we can follow the consequences. Global warming is a process of change that is ongoing. Changes have occurred and more change is in store. Many people, too many in high government office for my taste, have shown a blindness to the changes going on and even less appreciation of the changes coming in near future. Failure to anticipate oncoming change means failure to prepare for it.

Another example of a deep refusal to accept change is the position taken by strict creationists. These people believe the world is pretty much the way it always has been. Natural processes of change are not something they comprehend. Only acts of magic bring about changes, instantaneous major changes such as the creation of the earth in one day. It is usual to credit religious traditions as the source of creationist thinking but I think change blindness is at the root of it.

People who love natural history and their natural environment are not immune to change blindness. Our

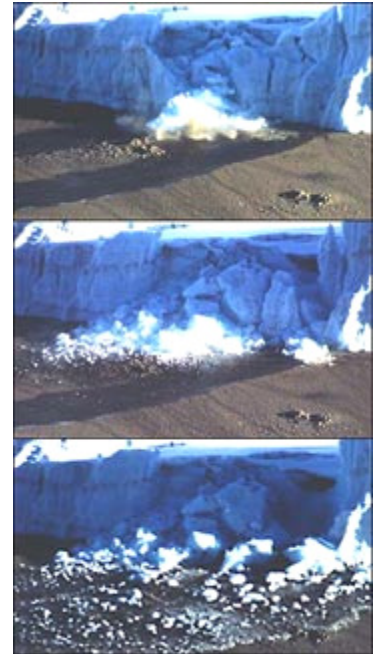
forests will never be the same as they were 100 years ago. Even in an area that has never been logged or touched by forest management, the processes that shaped that ecosystem no longer are taking place. All ecosystems will change. Trying to maintain natural areas, as if they will always be the way Europeans found them a century and a half ago is futile. Change of ecosystems is inevitable. This is not to say we shouldn't do our best to preserve natural areas, just that it is unreasonable to expect them always to be the way we have enjoyed them. David Wagner

## Change in One day

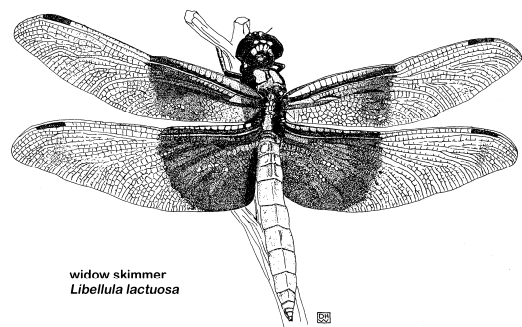
Dr. Vincent Keipper was in the right place at the right time to get this photo of the crumbling Furtwängler Glacier on Mt. Kilimanjaro.

The photo is dramatic evidence of the glacier's recession. Room-size blocks of ice tumbled across the trail Keipper had hiked the day before.

*Photo courtesy of Vincent Keipper*



## Wagner's 2007



widow skimmer  
*Libellula lactuosa*

## Willamette Valley Nature Calendar

David's calendar includes not only 12 fine drawings but also nature notes on plant and animal activity, holidays, religious observances, winter and summer solstice and much more. He tells us that in July the western long-eared bats are born and in December he reminds us that we can still plant spring flowering bulbs if it's not freezing weather.

You can pick up a 2007 calendar in Eugene at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History and Down to Earth Home and Garden Store. Otherwise, email David [davidwagner@mac.com](mailto:davidwagner@mac.com)