

Wild Encounters: Facing Predators and Creepy Crawlies

There seem to be two opposing views on animal threats. One claims they don't exist or are so rare that you're silly to worry about them and the other greatly exaggerates and sensationalizes it. The desert Southwest in particular is made out to be a creeping crawling carpet of doom out of an Indiana Jones movie. The truth is somewhere in the middle. You need not fear nature, irrational or uncontrolled fear only hurts your chances of survival, but you should learn to respect it.

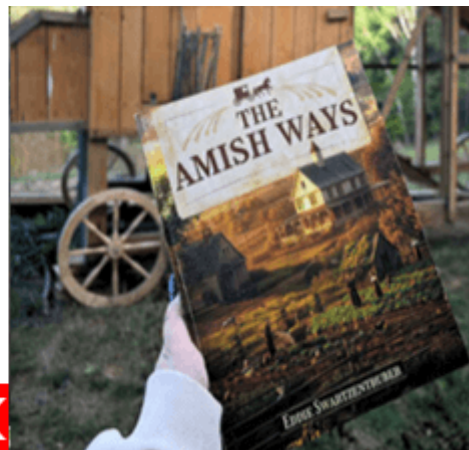
The Most Dangerous Predators

The most dangerous predators walk on two-legs. Nothing in the animal world is more dangerous than humans. Humans have tremendous capacity for good, but their capacity to do harm is just as impressive, both to others and to themselves.

According to the WHO, no animal save the mosquito, sends more humans to the hospital than humans. (Gallagher, 2024) I would say "other humans" but the greatest danger to our survival often comes from ourselves in the form of errors in judgement and lack of preparation.

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True Predators

Les Stroud makes some good points on predators in his book Survive! Essential Skills and Tactics to Get You Out of Anywhere Alive. (Stroud, 2008) He points out that, of the animals that are harmful to humans, most harm caused is accidental or unintentional, but a few species are true predators, of which it can be said that Homo sapiens is counted amongst their natural prey.

True Predators

- Lion (Panthera leo)
- Tiger (Panthera tigris)
- Polar Bear (Ursus maritimus)
- Saltwater Crocodile, Nile Crocodile (Crocodylus porosus, Crocodylus niloticus)
- Great White Shark (Carcharodon carcharias)

If you head into the territory of any of these, you had better be aware of that fact and understand their habits and how to not end up on the menu. A polar bear killed a mother and her one-year-old son in Wales, Alaska in 2023.

Surviving Predators

I am aware that this idea will be extremely unpopular with some folks who don't spend time in nature observing it, and think that all animals are cute, affectionate little domestic duckies and bunnies. The reality is that nature is often cruel.

If a wild animal decides that you are food, then you had better convince it that you aren't worth it. Wild animals make life and decisions on a regular basis just like your ancestors did. You have probably been taught not to solve problems with violence. They have no such inhibitions. On average, 47,000 people seek medical attention every year in the US due to being bitten or attacked by wildlife. (Gallagher, 2024)

Here are a few tips for surviving predators:

Situational Awareness

If you don't see them before they see you, you're done. Use optics. Watch for sign. Know when you are in their territory and obey the rules of each species. If you fry bacon in camp and sleep with a beard full of Vienna sausages in bear country, guess what? You're pig in a blanket to an opportunistic feeder. Set a guard and perimeter alarms around camp.

Evade, Avoid Detection

If you see them first, stay out of sight and get out of Dodge.

Make Noise

If they see you, make a racket and put your arms in air to make yourself look bigger. (Stroud, 2008) Most animals have learned to fear man and will beat feet. But animals, especially predators, know how to size up other animals. If you are confident, and armed, they'll pick up on it. If you're scared, they'll smell your fear a mile away. To predators, fear smells like dinner.

The only hesitation they may have before using violence is to decide whether a course of action will likely result in injury. Theirs, not yours.

One thing you have on your side is that Predators don't want to get injured. They need both their eyes and all of their other equipment in working order or they will have trouble surviving and reproducing. You need to convince them you're not worth the trouble. That if they come sniffing around, they're going to lose something they need to live.

Create Obstacles

Get up out of reach or create barriers or thornbushes. (Stroud, 2008) Get into a vehicle or a structure. Get a tree or a boulder between you.

Animals also naturally fear fire. Hugh Glass survived after being left for dead because he used his razor and a flint, the only tools Bridger and Fitzgerald left in his wallet, to make fire and scare two wolves off a Bison calf after they hamstrung it. He tried to scare them off. As previously mentioned, predators are pretty good at sizing up other animals and probably knew he was bluffing because they both bared their teeth at him instead of running.

Have An Escape Plan

If you read my writing, you have heard this before. Where is a tall climbable tree? When you build your obstacles, you should build-in an escape route. (Stroud, 2008) Otherwise, you are fish in a barrel.

Use Weapons

Animals are armed with some pretty impressive hardware. Man doesn't come with teeth and claws. We have to learn to arm and armor ourselves and practice to become effective with our arms. When it really comes down to it, our brain and hands are our best assets, so we had better use them.

Accidental Predators

The bulk of animals we fear fall into this category. (Stroud, 2008) They may be predators, but man isn't usually on their menu:

- Brown Bear, Black Bear & bears other than the Polar Bear
- Mountain Lion and other cats smaller than Lions & Tigers
- Hyenas
- Wolf & other Canids
- Most Sharks

- Large Constrictor Snakes
- American Alligator, Mugger Crocodiles and most Crocodiles and Caimans

Bears

There have been about 70 fatal brown bear attacks since the 1970's owing mostly to large numbers of people invading their territory. There have been 54 fatal black bear attacks in that same time. Attacks by black bears are less likely considering they have a much larger range and are present in much greater numbers. There are between ten and twenty times more black bears than brown in the USA.

Wolves

Defenders of wolves will tell you that there have only been two fatal wolf attacks in North America in the past 50 years or so. What they don't tell you is that there have been dozens of unprovoked, predatory attacks where people have survived thanks to the wolves being few in number, the tenacity of the survivors, modern firearms, and modern emergency medicine. Some of these attacks were vicious and survival miraculous.

There have been a few dozen fatal attacks by wolves on humans in North America recorded and at least another four-dozen non-fatal attacks recorded since the arrival of Europeans. These do not count attacks by captive animals. Some of these attacks were prey testing, some were predatory, and some could be called provoked, as they occurred when humans hunted down wolf packs, but sometimes after the wolf packs had killed humans. In a couple of instances, the wolves managed to kill the hunters, albeit at the cost of many wolves. (Wikipedia, 2024)

Rabies

Some of the wolf attacks and attacks by other canid species have been due to rabies. Rabid bats, skunks and foxes are most frequent carriers, but attacks by rabid mountain lions and

other animals have also been recorded. About 500 people seek medical attention per year in the US due to fox bites.

Thanks to prevention efforts there are now fewer than 10 rabies deaths per year in the USA. If bitten by an animal and rabies is suspected, the animal should be killed so the brain can be tested for rabies. If testing is not possible, rabies shots must begin within 2 weeks. After two weeks, the fatal rate is very near 100%. A few patients have survived using the Milwaukee protocol, but the survival rate is poor and prognosis still grim even if they survive, so get the vaccines. (Ghiglieri & Myers, 2012)

Other Dangerous Animals

Many other animals are potentially dangerous:

- **Bison**
- **Moose**
- **Wild Boar and other Suidae**
- **Ferral Dog**
- **Ferral Pig**
- **Peccary**
- **Deer Mice (Hantavirus) & Other Rodents**
- **Bats (Rabies)**
- **Venomous Snakes**
- **Gila Monster**
- **Stingray**
- **Moray Eel**

Venomous Snakes

In North America, 23 of our 30 species of venomous snakes are rattlesnakes. 7,000-8,000 people are bitten each year. About one in 500 bites is fatal, but rattlesnake bites are no joke. Rattlesnake venom is hemotoxic and is very damaging to blood vessels and tissue. (Ghiglieri & Myers, 2012)

Rodents

Some 27,000 Americans see doctors each year due to rodent bites.

Arthropods & Invertebrates

- Mosquitos
- Biting Flies & Gnats
- Bees, Hornets & Wasps
- Assassin Bug (Chagas)
- Spiders
- Scorpions
- Ticks & Chiggers
- Centipedes
- Jellyfish
- Cone Snails
- Fresh Water Snails (Schistosomiasis)
- Parasitic Flukes, Worms & Leeches

Insects

According to the WHO, diseases born by mosquitos kill more than everything else on this, including humans. (Gallagher, 2024) The assassin bug of South America and Mexico infects people with chagas disease. Relatives live in the US and it estimated that some 230,000 Americans live with the disease.

Arthropod repellents containing DEET are most effective against mosquitoes. A higher percentage of DEET doesn't improve effectiveness, you just don't have to reapply it as often. 100% will protect you for 12 hours so it will get you through the peak activity hours of mosquitoes and flies. DEET is safe for humans including children. (Fradin & Day, 2022)

Using permethrin on clothing together with DEET topical lotion improves effectiveness and provides longer lasting protection against both malaria carrying mosquitoes and ticks.

Vitamin D patches don't work. (Ives & Pakewitz, 2005) If you want something natural, try lemon oil eucalyptus. There is some evidence that lemon oil eucalyptus, IR3535 and Picaridin by themselves are better at repelling ticks, biting flies and midges (but not mosquitoes) than DEET lotion by itself. (Diaz, 2016)

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Scorpions

Between 2005 and 2015 scorpions sent over 16,000 Americans to the hospital and more than half of those visits occurred in one state: Arizona. The Arizona bark scorpion (*Centruroides sculpturatus*) is the most venomous scorpion in the US. Scorpions fluoresce in UV light, making them easy to find at night. (Ghiglieri & Myers, 2012) They are nocturnal and often found near water sources and under the mesquite bark.

Most bites occur because people fail to shake out their boots, clothing, sleeping bags, etc. In Arizona, I wouldn't unpack my sleeping bag until I was ready to climb inside. Unpack it, give it a shake, and climb inside. You also learn to look before you reach, step or sit. Otherwise, you might find that a rattlesnake, scorpion or cactus spine was there first.

References