

Which Native Animals Could Cause You the Most Harm?

This topic came to me in an article in Texas Wildlife by Todd Steele about the various dangers we might encounter outdoors. I didn't take a poll, but I bet the majority of people would answer the above question that they are most afraid of snakes.

I have not been able to find any actual data on numbers of snake bites in Texas, but I did find that nationwide; only 0.06% of all snakebites in the U.S. are fatal. So while human deaths from snake bites are rare, they can be very painful and some folks have long-lasting effects from the venom. And, anti-venom treatments can be very expensive.

Interestingly, fifty percent of all snake bites are to 18-28 year-olds, 90% of those to males, nearly always to the hands or feet. Steele points out that "A large percentage of snakebites come from people trying to dispatch one". I suspect those two facts are related.

While not so much a danger here in the Hill Country, Steele notes that alligators are another reptile that one needs to be cautious about. Down along the coast, fishermen need to be wary of several things in addition to alligators. Stepping on a stingray while wade-fishing can be very painful, and a couple of saltwater catfish also have toxic fins to avoid. In the last 100 years, only two fatal shark attacks have occurred in Texas.

Africanized bees can be extremely aggressive and will pursue trespassers up to a ¼ mile, so you certainly want to avoid any hive you don't know to be safe. Most of us have experienced red imported fire ants, and while not the danger that the Africanized bees can present, they can certainly be unpleasant and some people may have an allergic reaction to them. (Neither of these are native, of course.)

Staying with insects, scorpions, and brown recluse and black widow spiders can certainly render painful bites or stings, and these critters can be found in and around human habitation so the chance of people encountering them is greater around homes than out "in nature". Brown recluse spider bites are not necessarily painful at first, but can lead to very severe tissue damage in a few days if not promptly treated.

The number of feral hogs is growing fast in Texas, (currently estimated at about 2.6 million) and may eclipse the number of white-tailed deer (around 4 million) in a few years. I don't know for sure if there have been any cases of hogs attacking humans in Texas—they would much rather run away than to attack. But the boars have really impressive sharp tusks and will certainly attack if threatened—something many dogs have discovered. Sows with piglets can certainly be ferocious as well.

The apex predator in Texas is, of course, the mountain lion. There is no doubt that mountain lions are capable of attacking and even killing a human, and whenever such an event occurs, it certainly makes the news and thus causes many people to fear them. But in fact, in the last 35 years there have been only four attacks by mountain lions on humans in Texas, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. There have been no fatalities from attacks in Texas. If you come upon a mountain lion while on foot, do not run like a prey animal. Instead, try to look as large as possible, wave your arms, make noise and fight back.

So what is the native animal that poses the greatest danger to humans in Texas? That would have to be the white-tailed deer. I know. Those gentle creatures with the big brown eyes that like to chew on your flowers seem so harmless. But there are four million of them in Texas, and they are jumping fences and crossing roads and in 2013, nearly 6000 Texans collided with a deer while driving. And we don't know how many accidents they caused by drivers trying to avoid hitting them. Insurance statistics show that one out of every 333 Texas drivers will hit one. In 2013, eleven of those collisions were fatal. Nationwide, 1.25 million collisions occur every year resulting in 150 deaths and 10,000 injuries and a cost of about 4 billion dollars.

So if you are headed out camping or hunting or fishing or to hike in the woods, be especially careful driving out there.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books "Hill Country Ecology," "Hill Country Landowner's Guide" and "A Beginner's Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners." He can be reached at jstmn@krc.com. Previous columns can be seen at www.hillcountrynaturalist.org.