



When Wildlife Attacks

Employee Health Safety; Traveler Toolkit

6/20/2017

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Summary

With global population growth often comes urban and peri-urban sprawl that places humans in close proximity to wild animals. This encroachment is exacerbated by adventure tourism, exotic pets, and basic human curiosity and has resulted in various fatal and near-fatal incidents. Travelers should heed a simple warning: exercise caution and avoid contact with wild animals.

Recent Incidents

There are two main concerns in human-animal interaction beyond the desire for peaceful coexistence.

The first concern is that the expansion of human settlement and land use has come into direct conflict with wild animal migration or hunting patterns. For example, humans have come into closer physical proximity to migratory birds, including their resting places and outright feeding them, raising concerns about avian flu (including H5N1) passing to domestic fowl and/or humans. Similarly, roadways have dramatically impacted wildlife, causing both human and animal fatalities, habitat reduction, pollution, and barriers to migration routes. Wild boars live in urban areas of Berlin; monkeys are a relatively common site in Cape Town; leopards are sighted in Mumbai; peregrine falcons, and foxes among other species have colonized many UK cities, often due to easy access to food sources. In May 2017, farmers sustained significant financial losses when wild cats killed 100 domesticated sheep in Keiyo South,

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Kenya, an agrarian community on the outskirts of the Kaptagat forest. Finally, non-indigenous animals have been introduced in some areas, often as novelty pets, with no native predator. This can lead to population explosions and an imbalance to local ecosystems, as seen with snakes in Guam or the gray squirrel, American mink, and ring-necked parakeets in the UK. The second concern is that animal attacks against humans can cause death, injury, and disease transmission. Some recent, notable examples of human-animal encounters include:

June 12, 2017: A monk was killed by an elephant that was part of a Buddhist procession. (source)

May 22, 2017: A sea lion pulled a girl whose family had been feeding it into the ocean in British Columbia, Canada. (source)

January 10, 2017: Troops of baboons attacked herding communities in the Sool region of Somalia. These attacks are blamed on a severe drought that has led to food shortages. (source)

January 2, 2017: A leopard roaming the city of Raiganj, in West Bengal, India, attacked 35 people over the course of several hours. A crowd of citizens attempted to corral the animal before wildlife authorities could capture and relocate it to a sanctuary. While this was the first recorded leopard engagement in 60 years, their habitat has shrunk, forcing big cats to seek food in close proximity to humans. (source)

December 26, 2016: A cougar attacked two pet dogs in Edmonton, Canada. The owner physically engaged the animal, chasing it into a forest, although it returned and clawed the man as he tended to his injured pet. (source)

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December 25, 2016: A child died and her grandmother was injured in a rhinoceros attack near the Chitwan National Park in Nawalparasi, Nepal. This was the fourth such attack in two months near the park's buffer zone. (source)

December 24, 2016: A woman rescued her pet dog from a crocodile attack in the Northern Territory of Australia. The region has many warning signs and traps set, as crocodiles are relatively common in the region's waterways. (source)

December 24, 2016: A man was trampled to death by two elephants from the Koshi Tappu Wildlife reserve in Nepal. (source)

November 25, 2016: A hippo attacked a vehicle that it likely perceived as a threat in South Africa's Kruger National Park. (source)

November 25, 2016: A person was killed by a tiger in near the Chitwan National Park in Nawalparasi, Nepal. (source)

July 25, 2016: A woman was killed and another seriously mauled by Siberian tigers at Beijing Badaling Wildlife World after they paused to exit their vehicle within the park. (source)

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India recorded 166 human deaths from wild animal attacks, including 133 people killed by elephants, during 2012-2015. Other deaths were attributed to tigers, leopards, wild boar, and Indian bison.

Risks of Exposure

According to CDC research, "Prevention measures aimed at minimizing injury from animals should be directed at certain high-risk groups such as farmworkers, agricultural workers, and

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parents of children with dogs.” Notably, a preponderance of interactions with dogs -- as it pertains to rabies -- is with feral dogs, not family pets.

One of the main risks -- beyond death or maiming -- from an encounter with a wild animal is zoonotic disease transmission. These are diseases spread between animals and people. The CDC reports that more than 6 out of every 10 known infectious diseases in people are spread from animals, and 3 out of every 4 new or emerging infectious diseases in people are spread from animals. Anyone, including healthy people, can become sick from a zoonotic disease. Some zoonotic diseases are transmitted by mosquito (see OSAC reporting) or other insects (plague (see OSAC reporting)), but many -- like Ebola (see multiple OSAC reports), rabies (see text box), anthrax (see OSAC reporting), leptospirosis (see OSAC reporting), and various poxes -- are transmitted by direct contact with or immediate proximity to mammals or their habitats.

If weather conditions or a reduction in habitat cause food scarcity, wild animals are likely to become food-conditioned, straying into human habitat and foraging in crops, garbage, or even cupboards as regular food sources. Culling wild animals in urban areas -- like the fox population in London -- is expensive and unlikely to stop a so-called menace, as many are territorial.

Wild animals, by nature, can be tamed but not domesticated; even among those considered “friendly,” a bite or an attack can never be discounted. This includes exotic pets, feral cats/dogs, monkeys, or other seemingly social or gentle animals.

Response & Guidance

Some areas more prone to wildlife encounters are taking action:

The West Bengal (India) Forest Ministry is creating a new Wildlife South Division in light of multiple elephant attacks and stampedes in the past 7-8 years. The division will be tasked with monitoring elephant movements and reducing human-animal conflict.

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Australia and South Africa have the second- and third-largest number of shark attacks (behind the U.S.) in the world. The countries have begun using drones to identify potentially dangerous situations. Drones are also being used in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa to herd elephants and rhinos away from potentially dangerous situations, to monitor their movement patterns, and to watch for poachers. Still, confrontations between humans and wild animals in their native environment may be inevitable in some locations.

The UAE recently announced a law banning the private ownership of exotic, wild animals – especially big cats -- that are considered a symbol of status by some in the Gulf region and introduced fines and jail time for violations.

The likelihood of being victimized in an animal attack can be minimized significantly by simple avoidance techniques and maintaining a physical distance.

Hikers are advised to carry animal repellent spray, to be in groups of more than two people, and to make sufficient noise so as to avoid surprising wildlife.

In wildlife preserves, national parks, zoos, or other wild habitats where encounters with wildlife are desired, always heed the warnings and advice of a guide or ranger. Travelers should keep a safe distance, including the use of some form of physical barrier, from wild animals.

Do not swim in murky water, where people are fishing, or where birds are feeding. Do not wear shiny objects while swimming in open waters. Consult with locals wherever you travel to understand any particular local precautions you may not anticipate.

Particularly in drought-stricken (Somalia, for example) insecure water storage pits may be contaminated by animals that are able to access the reservoirs. Consuming water contaminated with animal urine or feces is a primary means to transmit zoonotic diseases.

Travelers in areas with feral animal populations, especially dogs, should avoid any contact or engagement. This includes physical contact, feeding, or sheltering them.

For Further Information

CDC's Be Safe Around Animals

For more information on global health and diseases, please contact OSAC's Global Health and Pandemics Analyst.

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