

Wild Things to Avoid!

By Dan Groebner

Hiking, camping, hunting and fishing are some of the safest healthy physical activities. You can not only become more physically fit but mental health also gets better with outdoor activities for many people. When we make efforts to be in the “wild,” we usually want to see, hear and experience wild things. Fortunately, 99% of those wild things are safe and won't harm us. However, certain precautions can make the experience even safer and more enjoyable.

The following information is not intended to scare anyone or be a complete review of all dangers encountered on our ventures. You always have to be aware of unique dangerous situations. For example, a rock that makes a nice stepping stone can be an ankle breaker if stepped on awkwardly. A good day can turn back quickly if you're not prepared for the basic wild things that we can count on up here in the White Mountains and Rim Country. We have little reason not to be prepared for bad weather such as cold rains and wind in the summer along with sudden, blinding snowstorms in the fall, winter and spring. Exploring unfamiliar territory means you should have a map, compass, GPS and knowledge how to use them. This article focuses on the wildlife of the White Mountain area so cockroaches and scorpions and unruly neighbors are not included.

We are all aware of the obvious big stuff to avoid. Well, maybe not everybody, as you can find plenty of videos on the internet of people getting run over or gored by elk and deer that seem tame. By far, the most dangerous elk and deer are those roadside nocturnal car killers that prey on vehicles traveling too fast at night.

There have been enough stories and hysteria published about large carnivores, such as wolves, bears and lions, to get our attention but how much should we worry about these predators when hiking and camping? Although these animals are certainly capable of killing people, they rarely do and you are in much more danger from your wife, husband or hiking companion (and we are not talking about their cooking!). It's uncommon to encounter these animals in the wild but the experts say to make yourself look big and confident, yell at the animal and slowly back away to a safer location if possible. So don't use the old prank of just making sure you can run faster than your hiking mates to avoid a bear attack, as the animal may just choose to chase the thing moving the fastest and looking the most worried!

Less obvious, but just as deadly, can be tame-looking animals that are infected with the calm or dumb form of rabies. Foxes, skunks and bats are the animals most commonly affected in the White Mountains. Children (and some of us challenged adults) should always be reminded not to touch any of these critters but if anyone does get exposed through a bite or open wound, they can get medicine to keep them from getting really sick and dying. The post-exposure vaccinations are not given with pencil-thick needles in the belly anymore and are relatively painless. But they must be given within a day or so of the exposure to be effective. Rabies is 100% treatable but it's also 100% fatal if not treated right away.

With mild winters and warmer summers comes more javelina and venomous snakes. Common sense keeps most of us at safe distances from these guys and you almost have to try to get hurt from them.

Unfortunately, it's not the same for the dogs we bring hiking, as their instincts and curiosities often get them in trouble. The best way to avoid this problem is to keep pets close enough to react and help them out if these animals make an appearance. If you plan to hike in warmer areas with more javelina and snakes, you might want to consider specialized training that's available for you and your dog. Snakebites are rarely fatal to humans if treated immediately.

Most people wouldn't consider blackbirds very dangerous or something to worry about, unless a grackle decided to use the hedge by your front door as its new nest site! Many birds can become so aggressively defensive near their nests that blood is drawn from beak strikes on a surprise strafing run to the forehead. Northern goshawks usually nest in more remote areas but if you happen to wander underneath one in the spring with chicks present, be ready for some amazingly quick and acrobatic attacks from every angle. Great horned owls are said to have enough strength to break a person's neck if you are messing with their chicks in the nest. So keep your feet on the ground and you should be OK with Arizona's largest owl. And remember, it's against the law to disturb nests if they have eggs and/or chicks in them unless it's a human health issue. Most chicks fly out of the nests in a matter of days or a couple of weeks so these types of problems are usually just temporary. Don't worry, birds can't give you rabies, only mammals!

And then we get to the really deadly critters. Fortunately, it's not moist enough in Arizona's White Mountains to harbor many mosquitoes which are the world's deadliest animals since they transmit malaria. But the Africanized honey bees sure make up for the missing mosquitoes. So far, it appears to be too cold along the Rim and into higher elevations for this type of bee to survive. But local hornets can certainly swarm and ruin a hike unless you can vacate the area quickly enough to avoid many bites. Insect bites always carry the risk of an allergic reaction so carry your "epi-pen" or other medicine if you know you could go into anaphylactic shock. Anybody stung by a bee, hornet or even centipede should be monitored closely for at least an hour to look for signs of shock which need to be treated immediately in a medical facility.

Although we don't have brown recluse spiders around here, there are black widow and brown spiders that can cause some nasty bite wounds if left untreated. Some bites aren't painful at first, but can progress to larger lesions, pain and flu-like symptoms of cramping, nausea and headaches. We don't have the official fire ant either as it's found in more humid areas of southeast US, from Texas to Florida. Unfortunately, there are cousins of the fire ant who live in the White Mountains that can bite and sting, luckily not with the potent alkaloid poison of the real fire ants. People most vulnerable to complications from bites include the very young, old or others with weak immune systems. Even healthy people might need oral antibiotics to clear the bite infection. If serious symptoms are absent, a simple cold compress and OTC pain medication may be all that is needed. Lotions containing antihistamines or corticosteroids can also help relieve symptoms.

There are also wild things to avoid, not for your safety, but rather for the wild thing itself. Springtime is when many people find young animals such as deer fawns or baby birds on their hikes or in their backyards. Kind-souled people want to pick them up and care for them since they appear abandoned. However, most of these critters have not been abandoned and will be cared for once you leave the area.

Chicks that have fallen out of nests can be safely put back into the nest or in the nest tree, as it's just an urban myth that they will be abandoned by their parents because they have the human scent on them now. Even elk calves, whose mothers have a keen sense of smell, unlike birds, will be accepted by mom after handling by humans. In the vast majority of cases, wild animals will have a better chance of survival in the wild with their parents than they will being taken care of by humans. Rehabilitation in captivity is very stressful for most animals.

So there's a list of some of the animals to be aware of when enjoying the White Mountain outdoors but are there any plants we should avoid? Of course, unless you enjoy itching your skin raw from wandering barefoot through a poison ivy patch or possibly dying from eating the wrong mushroom, you want to avoid those. There are many more types of plants to avoid for various reasons, but we don't have room here this month. Tune in to next month's GYMOAZ for a guide to problem plants in the White Mountains.

Although most problem encounters with wildlife occur in the spring when young are present or in the fall during mating seasons, you'll want to be prepared throughout the summer also. A little common sense goes along way when dealing with wild animals. Be aware of your surroundings, especially with any children and pets that get to come along. Don't feed the wildlife no matter how hungry they look or how many people fed them before you. They'll lose their fear of people, possibly threaten or hurt someone and then will have to be permanently removed, just because somebody fed them. Keep Wildlife Wild! Now that you are better prepared to deal with wildlife encounters, go enjoy yourself with some healthy exercise and feel more comfortable surrounded by Arizona's White Mountains.