

The fascinating spotted hyena



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

This column is part of an ongoing series that will appear here monthly. Many aspects of Africa, wildlife, culture, and safari life will be covered here, along with a few hunting tales along the way.

On safari, every day ends with sundowners around a mopane fire. Mopane is the prevalent tree, sometimes taking the shape of a shrub, in all the hot, dry, low-lying areas of Southern Africa.

It makes excellent campfire wood because of the soft, pleasant-smelling smoke it gives off and the wonderful coals it makes when burning. Mopane is one of the heaviest woods around, weighing in at more than a ton per cubic meter.

The last glows of the sunset disappeared, and darkness crept over the bushveld. With the dark, began a chorus of noises from the cough of a leopard to the roars of an angry male lion, growling at the many lionesses in his pride.

A bushbaby in an acacia tree above our tent voiced his discontent with the whole situation.

Suddenly, the darned-est collection of noise one ever did hear began. It sounded like a cross between a one-man-band coming off a three-day drunk and a three-year-old toddler, hyperactive on a double batch of leftover Easter candy.

The laughs, cries, whimpers, screeches, and groans, all at the same



The spotted hyena represents just about everything there is in Africa, and there is a love/hate relationship with him. (Courtesy photo/Wikimedia commons, Bernard Dupont)

time, were coming from the spotted hyenas in the dry riverbed. Spend a little time in the African bushveld and you will learn to respect him more than the lion.

If there ever was an animal on this earth that people universally hate, loathe, ridicule, laugh at, respect, and secretly fear, it is the hyena. He is one of the most accomplished processors of human flesh, both as a scavenger and a predator, newly recognized as a super predator, you are likely to ever stumble across.

Africans call him Fisi, but he goes by his Latin name on the streets, Crocuta Crocuta.

Before you start getting after me for being so hard on old Fisi, understand that Africans have a love/hate relationship with him. Fisi, while not as dangerous as lions or leopards, can and do, kill humans, especially when prey is scarce.

Hyenas tend to attack children, women, and frail men, but will even go after a healthy male.

Fisi will take a bite off the face of a person who is

sleeping outside, bravely walking right up to the prone person. They probably come by that habit innocently because the Maasai tribe traditionally leave their dead out to be consumed by hyenas.

The hyenas are also known for chasing another predator off a kill, or eating their own prey, while the prey is still alive. Brutal but welcome to Africa.

The fear for old Fisi does not come from their eating the occasional human, because much of the wildlife considers man to be a blue plate special. Fisi is a spiritual animal, said to be under the power of witches, or mchawi as they are known in Africa.

Witches use them because hyenas can be trained, tamed, and swift. I have no evidence of the trained part, but it is based on some truth. Fisi are believed to be owned by witches, and used to attack or kill whatever enemy has crossed the path of the witch in a bad way.

Before you scoff, Africans believe the tales, and in every tale, there is some truth. Over the years, hunters have occasionally

killed a hyena, finding the inside of the ear to be tattooed with some strange markings and symbols. I have seen it and have no explanation.

In proportion to body mass, a hyena heart is twice the size of a lions, giving him stamina enough to chase prey over three miles. He can be comical to watch run, because they always looked scrunched up or crippled, the way they sort of hop/run, at a pretty good clip reaching 40 mph.

The jaws of a hyena are among the strongest of any mammal. In comparison, a lion can exert 650 psi with a bite, while Fisi can top 1100 psi, enough to crack a giraffe femur in two. Only a polar bear or gorilla can top Fisi for bite strength.

A mature spotted hyena will reach 150 pounds and can live past 20 years in the wild. They are more closely related to cats than dogs, despite their dog-like appearance.

Their closest relative is actually the mongoose. Unlike other carnivores, spotted hyenas have a complex social system where they live in female

dominated clans, often numbering over 75 individuals.

The only real enemy of the spotted hyena is the lion. They are mortal enemies. In some areas, they compete for resources, leading to infanticide, the practice of killing each other's young.

One on one, a lion will destroy a hyena. He outweighs him by several hundred pounds and has powerful claws to help fight. However, hyena often attack in a pack. A pack of hyenas will shred a lion in short order, as the lion cannot match the speed and ferocity of a pack.

Estimates show there are about 45,000 spotted hyena left in the wild. They only live in Africa. Science says they lived in North America about a million years ago, but our climate gets a little too cold for them here.

They are mostly nocturnal so just seeing one is a real experience. I have a friend who has made 11 safaris, and still not seen one.

In the parks, hyena become less wary and can

often be seen during daylight, but in the real world, they lay up during the daytime. We were fortunate to see a couple during our trip there.

Africans are a people based on superstitions and spirits. You will see huts abandoned because someone died there, and the remaining family refuses to live there among the spirit of the deceased person, out of fear.

These same people drag their terminally ill, and gravely injured, to the bush, so that Fisi will come and finish them off. Finish them off is an understatement, as the following day, there will be nothing left, except possibly a few bones, marking the spot.

Maybe the Africans view the Fisi as the angel of death and laugh at him nervously out of fear.

To me, hyenas are the true representative of Africa, showing both the positive and negative side of Africa, as well as the backward and progressive. They are portrayed as an abnormal and ambivalent animal, considered sly, brutish, and dangerous, and at the same time embodying power, excessiveness, beauty, and sacredness.

He is one of my favorite animals on the planet, and I don't laugh at him. Africa would not be the same without him.

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The nature fix: Nature's wellness gift to our youth

FOYAN

By Anne Janik

What impact does an early introduction to the outdoors have on who a child will become as an adult, and how they are affected physically, mentally, emotionally, and even morally as they grow up?

As it turns out, we can directly connect childhood exposure to outdoor activities with positive long-term outcomes. Time spent outdoors, whether in play, outdoor education, recreation, or even gardening can play a crucial role in building resiliency and have a positive impact on the mental and physical well-being in our youth.

Playing outside helps children use their imaginations to develop creative thinking and problem solving skills. Many outdoor activities require kids to work together and communicate in order for everyone to have fun or to accomplish a common goal.

It has also been discovered that a bacterium in the soil increases sero-

tonin in the brain and improves mood. Who knew that getting dirty is a good thing!

The more outdoor time children have the more physical activity they get. Outdoor play promotes physical coordination, strength, endurance, attributes necessary to develop a healthy body and mind.

It is an easy and natural way of encouraging physical activity in young people.

As adults, many of us have learned an escape to a special place in nature helps us relax. A visit to our nearby public lands to exercise, walk with a friend, or enjoy the beautiful weather certainly helps us recharge and re-set mentally and emotionally.

Our kids need that too! The more time children spend in nature and the greater sense of connection they personally feel with nature, the less likely they are to experience symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, headache, and other physical afflictions.

Nature's fix helps them build mental and physical resiliency.

It has been shown that the more time we can get younger generations to spend in the outdoors, the greater sense of connection they will feel with nature, and the more likely they will become involved with environmental stewardship and preservation.

We want the next generation to feel ownership towards our public lands and care for our natural resources. After all, we are part of nature. Simple actions such as conserving water, turning out lights, recycling, establishing native plants, talking about the environment, and picking up litter is a great start.

At Friends of Youth and Nature (FOYAN), we believe strongly in both the individual impacts that activities in nature have on each young person, as well as the broader long-term goal of creating another generation who feel strongly about the importance of maintaining and safeguarding our public lands for the benefit of all.

Our goal is to continue supporting programs that have both a personal and philosophical impact on



Fourth grade students spent a morning on the Grand Mesa National Forest learning to cross-country ski. It isn't as easy as it looks with very different levels of physical coordination but the kids had a great time and learned some endurance skills! Friends of Youth and Nature (FOYAN) promote these types of outings to get more youth outside in Delta, Montrose, Mesa and Ouray counties. (Anne Janik/Special to the MDP)

the future of our natural areas, in order that future generations may enjoy these spaces for many years to come.

We would like your support to help FOYAN continue to provide a variety of outdoor experiences for our local youth. In our sixth year as a nonprofit, we have served over 8,000 youth and their families with outdoor activities

and environmental learning opportunities.

Please consider donating to FOYAN through Colorado Gives on or before Dec. 5, where your donations will be boosted through the incentive fund.

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