

# Dangerous Snakes



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Almost everyone has some type of fear, some to the extent of it being a phobia. I don't particularly have anything I am afraid of. There are many things I treat with a certain respect, such as dangerous game, but for the most part, no phobias have entered my thought process.

My wife of many years has a fear of spiders. I will be summoned from all corners of the house to dispatch an 8-legged creature that stumbled into her household. I would not go so far as to call it full blown Arachnophobia, but it is a fear, nonetheless.

My wife does not agree with my claim about her fear of spiders, but I stand by my statement as the guys who must evict the interlopers. She replied, "The only fear I have is dumasaphobia, and that comes from having to live with you."

So as not to be driven off topic by the prattle of an overly sarcastic spouse, let's move on. I have a hunting buddy who is deathly afraid of snakes. He once saw a small eastern diamond-back rattlesnake while on a quail hunt in Alabama several years back.

Upon seeing the small snake, who was just as startled seeing him, my



This 6 foot Black Mamba wandered into our camp last summer while we were in Zimbabwe. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

buddy retreated to the truck, where remained the duration of the hunt. He was so terrified of snakes; he did not go hunt anymore that trip.

The condition my friend suffers from is a type of anxiety disorder, brought on by a specific fear. In this case, his extreme and overwhelming fear of snakes is called ophidiophobia. This fear causes him to go sit in the truck anytime someone even mentions a snake.

Few animals strike as much fear into people as venomous snakes. Although the chances of running into a venomous snake, getting bitten and

dying from the toxin, are relatively small, it remains a fear for some folks. There are over 600 species of venomous snakes in the world, and 30 of them live in the United States.

The most dangerous viper is often a matter of opinion, and sometimes might be the one on the ground in front of you. For my money, the gaboon viper with 2-inch-long fangs ranks very near the top. He is not aggressive, but his bite is usually fatal.

The boomslang should also rank near the top of the list. He lives in trees and usually makes

an aerial assault on his victim. When bitten, the victim often feels fine and displays no side effects, at least not right away. When the effects do come, it is too late. You had best have your affairs in order.

The most fearsome looking venomous snake must be the King Cobra. These fellas reach a dozen feet in length and have an ability to fan out their neck, making them look even more dangerous. If that isn't enough, their venom is potent enough to kill 11 people with a single bite.

Arguably the most venomous snake in the world

is the inland taipan, who hails from the land down under, Australia. His venom is so powerful that a single dose can kill 289 humans. Fortunately, he is a docile creature and usually does not bite unless provoked.

For my money, the deadliest snake in the world doesn't have the most toxic venom. This guy makes up for it by working harder and biting more people. He is the saw-scaled viper who lives in Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan. He lives in some of the most highly populated areas in the world. The saw-scaled viper bites an estimated 50,000 people each year, killing some 5,000 of them.

Before you get to feeling all warm and fuzzy because all these dangerous snakes live in other countries, you better look before you step. In the good old United States, we average 8,000 snake bites a year, but only about 6 of them board the last train west. The big reason we don't have as many deaths as other countries is because of our access to medical care for snakebites.

Of the 30 species of venomous snakes in the United States, the most venomous and largest would be the eastern diamondback rattlesnake. I have encountered these snakes while living in Florida. They can reach 6 feet in length and as big around as your thigh. Fortunately, they like to be left alone and really must be stepped on or bothered to come after you.

No need to panic and sit in the truck as Colorado is home to 30 species of snakes, and only 3 of them are venomous. All of them are easily identifiable and

are usually not aggressive. They all usually only bite in self-defense.

The 3 that live here are the prairie rattlesnake *Crotalus viridis*, the western massasauga *Sistrurus tergeminus*, and the midget faded rattlesnake *Crotalus oreganus*. They can all be identified on the street by their broad triangular head, elliptical pupils, heat-sensing pits between the eyes and nostrils, and a rattle on the tail.

In general, there is no need to go sit in the truck. Snakes try to avoid any contact or interaction with people. If you leave them alone, they will do likewise. The only aggressive snakes I have encountered in the States would be the cotton-mouth water moccasin. Those nasty snakes will chase you if you get in their way. Fortunately, they do not live in Colorado.

It turns out I do have a phobia. It is called ligyrophobia, the fear of being yelled at by your spouse. I suddenly developed it when I looked up what my wife's phobia meant. Turns out that dumasaphobia is the fear of stupid people.

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# Enduring Eagles Face Winter's Chill



## Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

Our backs are warmed by the winter sun – gentle but penetrating. Standing in a wide spot of the Bostwick Park Road, we watch for bald eagles. The mighty azure sky sweeps from horizon to horizon. We are resolute in seeing the birds, knowing they make a gritty stand against the cold.

When our nation was young, confined to the Atlantic seaboard, we counted over 100,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. Declining numbers through the early 1900s led to Federal protection in 1940. The US Fish and Wildlife Service recorded 417 nesting pairs in 1963 – only 834 reproducing individuals across the U.S.; a national symbol nearly gone.

Courage through law and action brought them back. In 2019 nearly 317,000 birds were in the contiguous 48 states. They are visible to most people in the winter as the raptors migrate and

usually flock together near open water to face winter's challenges. The bird's comeback is a wildlife success story that worked because many people across the country contributed toward making it happen.

Recent overnight valley temperatures fell to zero degrees. The eagles brace for the cold with several strategies. One of those involves the feathers. The shaft forms the main stem of each feather with barbs (the softer tissue) that branches from the shaft at an angle. Barbules fork at an angle from the barbs with hooklets on the ends to lock each barb in place with the other barbs that extend to the end of the shaft.

The shafts are especially strong, made of keratin, like our fingernails. The feathers, combined with the layer of down underneath, help insulate eagles in the extreme cold. Molting at age 4 or 5 transitions the dark immature eagle to adulthood, yielding white head and tail feathers. The term bald comes from the expression "piebald," or having a stark combination of colors, usually black and white.

They lean into winter with intent to endure. They will eat anything (carrion, roadkill) and are not above stealing someone else's meal. Although they gather in

areas near open water, agricultural lands offer prey species that can be easier to pursue. Their bodies are built for hunting, but they are opportunistic.

Searching the area, a bald eagle suddenly rises above the juniper trees. It's a big bird. Its wings flap up and down. It pumps the air like a weightlifter on a bench press down at the gym. Its back is poised to support its pectoral muscles as it tugs its frame, weighing up to 10 pounds, above the trees.

A raven, provoked by the eagle's presence, berates the larger bird. The bald arcs side to side. The feathers at its wingtips spread widely apart. Looking like fingers and controlled by separate muscles, these primary feathers are adjusted to assist the bird's dips and rolls in flight. It retreats from the raven. What a sight. We're speechless.

There is something to their bravery to see them take on the world ascending into the great blue Colorado sky. John Magee, a pilot when mechanical human flight was young in the early 1900s, captured some of that daring when he wrote High Flight.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds. . .

Eagles survive. The challenges of winter – extreme cold, deprivation, competition for prey – are taken head on as they persist in this frigid time of year. This appears to be why, 200 years ago, the eagle was added to the Great Seal of the United States. Magee goes on,  
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue. . .  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace

Where never lark nor ever eagle flew –  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

Back on the ground, we see a family group perched at the top of an enormous cottonwood tree overlooking a field. Two adults, and an immature in the middle. Maybe they are just soaking up the January sun, conserving energy for later.

We – you and I – bear a multitude of challenges in our world today. But there is a lesson here in the eagle's approach; group up – we humans have most everything in common; tough it up – life has its seasons of winter along with summer. And add a dose of humility – courage isn't always about domination.

The late afternoon sun sets low in the tree branches. I study the eagle family. It's winter and storms may push back into Colorado soaking the birds, sending a chill to their bones. They endure with grace. I intend to be like them.

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Ridgway Reservoir has open water where eagles might roost. Look for them in the tops of trees around the Dallas Creek picnic area and downstream from the dam along the Uncompahgre River all the way through Montrose. Open stands of cottonwood trees where farm fields spread out (away from town) are also good places to watch. (Courtesy photo)