

Fears of Nature are Greatly Exaggerated and Mostly Unfounded

I recently read an article by a woman who described her visit to a tall grass prairie remnant in Kansas, and the utter joy she felt by simply walking among the grasses and wildflowers and experiencing what much of the middle of the country used to look like. But then she described a conversation she had with a waitress at a diner just down the road from the prairie. She asked the waitress if she ever goes there, and her answer was, "Oh no! My high school biology teacher showed us photos of what chigger bites look like!"

Of all people, it was her high school biology teacher who forever put the fear of wild places in that young girl's mind. And of course the media sensationalize every incident of anyone being injured, chased or just scared by anything in nature. Just today I saw, on TV, for the umpteenth time, the video of a woman, fishing from a 10 foot high pier and having a small shark grab her fish as she was reeling it in--the screams went on for some time. The San Antonio Zoo is now advertising their "Cold-Blooded Reptiles" in the manner that one might advertise a Halloween visit to a Haunted House.

Parents inadvertently instill in their children certain fears just by the act of protecting them from harm. When a mother sees her child getting too close to a hot stove or a fireplace, or picking up a knife, her actions, words and tone of voice tell the child this is something they should fear. And of course, when she sees her child pick up a bug or a lizard she may react the same way and the child gets the impression of danger. But the child will grow up to no longer fear a hot stove or a knife, but may forever fear wild things.

The reality, of course, is that there are far more dangerous things in your kitchen, or your garage, or your workshop, than there are in the local fields or woodlands. People cutting themselves with knives in the kitchen, or hitting their thumbs with a hammer, or falling off a ladder, seldom make the news. And then of course, there are all the sports we play. Most things that threaten us are man-made.

In 20 years of walking many miles over the hills, pastures, or creek bottoms of over 400 Hill Country properties, plus hiking the trails of most all of the Hill Country State parks, my wife and I have yet to see a poisonous snake. (The exception was an interesting visit to a known rattlesnake den in the fall on a ranch a little north of our area.) We certainly never encountered any threat from any animal. Or be bitten by any insect more serious than chiggers or occasional fire ants. The Hill Country is just not a dangerous place.

On the other hand, in that same period of time we have experienced two scorpion stings and one paper wasp sting, all either in the house or on the porch.

I guess the critters that most people are afraid of are snakes. Of course, nothing can be more harmless than non-venomous snakes, which make up the very high percentage of all snakes in the Hill Country. But since most people cannot, with confidence, tell the difference between harmless and poisonous snakes, all snakes strike fear in many people. People are almost always startled when seeing one, even if it is a little rough green snake or a tiny ring-necked snake. In 20 years of living in the Hill Country, I have seen only one rattlesnake—and it wasn't out in the pasture, but in our garage!

My concern about people being afraid of Nature is that they will therefore avoid spending any time with nature or learning about it. And to me that means they are missing out on one of life's greatest joys—experiencing Nature. It also drives some people to want to surround themselves with as little vegetation as possible, to cut the grass as short as possible, and to eliminate any wild animal, from a caterpillar to a mouse to a rabbit to a raccoon.

The “wild animal” I have the most concern for is the brown recluse spider. My wife was bitten many years ago and the subsequent wound was very painful and slow to heal. You are very much more likely to encounter one in your closet or under furniture or in your storage shed than in the wild.

Come by Riverside on Fridays from 10 to 12 and let's talk.

Until next time...

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