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# HOW TO SURVIVE THE BIG FIVE

CFlisi
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photo by Marcel Müller

The Land Rover has driven off without you, or you have become separated from the rest of your walking safari, or you just fell off your horse in the bush. All of a sudden you are alone, unarmed, and facing a snarling lion, trumpeting elephant, or snorting rhinoceros. What you do next will determine your chances of survival, it's that simple.

Of course, the likelihood of your facing one of the Big Five — lion, leopard, elephant, rhinoceros, or buffalo — is nil unless you happen to be on safari in Africa or in an extremely well-populated but poorly-guarded zoo. But if a trip to Africa is looming on your horizon, you might want to heed the advice I gleaned while on horse safari in Botswana and South Africa some years ago.

First of all, the Big Five aren't the only dangerous animals on the savanna. The hippopotamus is responsible for more deaths than any other mammal in Africa, a crocodile had eaten an American tourist three months before my visit (more about that later), and the placid giraffe has such a powerful kick that even lions tend to leave them alone. Of the 12 poisonous snakes in South Africa and Botswana, six will kill you immediately if you aren't treated, and maybe even if you are. Baboons, warthogs, even horned antelope under certain circumstances have proven to be deadly. You have to be careful at all times and with all creatures. The old adage about your being the interloper in THEIR territory should always be kept in mind.

The second thing to remember is the difference between predators and prey. Our bush guide in Botswana explained that if you are in the bush and come across a predator, such as a lion, and decide to run, you are 100 percent dead. If you instead face him or her down, stare directly at her, act defiant, and above all project a lack of fear, you have an 80 percent chance of coming out alive. That’s true for lions in Africa, tigers in India, and hyenas anywhere. It would be true of leopards and cheetahs as well, but the latter are solitary hunters and so shy they are unlikely to threaten man unless intemperately provoked.

There is a notable exception to this rule among predatory mammals — wild dogs (and tame ones too, for that matter). Dogs are among the only mammals that consider a direct stare as a challenge; staring could be reason enough to provoke an attack without any other incentive. The reason was explained to me as follows: dogs have an extremely sophisticated hierarchical social structure; each animal in the pack knows his or her place, from first to last. Staring is a way of challenging the animal on the next-highest rung of the pack ladder to move up your position. If you issue such a challenge, you have to be prepared to defend it . . . and maybe that is NOT what you want to do if you are facing a pack of wild dogs in the bush. The solution is not to run from a dog (that automatically triggers its predatory instinct) but instead confront the animal without visible fear, excluding the direct provocation of staring it in the eye.

These guidelines are for hapless tourists who happen to be on the ground.

When on a game drive in a Land Rover, the only important thing to remember is to follow your guide’s instructions, which invariably consist of:

- don’t stand up in the vehicle

- don’t make noise

- never EVER get out of the jeep.

When a tourist in the Tuli Block of Botswana violated these rules, he paid the consequences: he stood up in the jeep, he got out and started walking toward a feeding lion, he was furiously taking pictures — click click click — all the while. The lion too was furious about being disturbed while eating; he swiped the intruder across the chest with his powerful claws and took most of the front of the man off.

I wanted to know if the ranger in the jeep had done anything to the lion. “No,” I was told. “The lion was only doing what lions do. It’s the tourist who was out of bounds.”

Odd though it seems, the lions, leopards and cheetahs in many private game reserves are used to seeing, hearing, and smelling the boxy, gasoline-leaden presence of a four-wheel-drive vehicle. You can see Land Rovers lined up four and five deep to watch lions sleeping, eating, feeding their young. What happens is that game reserves with enough acreage can get the big cats used to the presence of jeeps by leaving fresh-killed game out on trees and then bringing the Land Rovers around when the kill is claimed. This ploy makes it possible for visitors to see leopards and cheetah that would otherwise be too shy to spot.

There is a danger inherent in this practice, though. Predators can become TOO complacent in the presence of man. This is what happened in the Okavango Delta of Botswana, on another horse safari. A group on horseback was lion-spotting, and one of the guides realized that a lion was stalking THEM. A horse is merely a zebra without stripes, right, and zebras are a favored prey of lions.

The guide managed to interpose himself between the lion and its intended prey. He was knocked off his horse but managed to pull out his gun and shoot and kill the lion before he was attacked. The horse was not so fortunate. In one version he was shot accidentally in the barrage aimed at the lion, in another he was mauled by the lion and had to be put down because of his wounds. This story was one of many we would hear about the most dangerous animals: those, like the lion, who have gotten too comfortable with mankind. (It seems that the dog is the only animal who has cast his lot with man without destroying himself in the bargain).

All the guides in Botswana had a healthy respect for lions. They traveled with rifles, bullwhips, knifes, and explosives, plus a radio to stay in contact with ranger headquarters. Every time we came across lion tracks, we headed in the opposite direction.

One morning we saw clear fresh paw prints of lions and leopards both. The lion tracks were headed north so the leopard tracks went south. Leopards aren’t stupid and neither were we; we also headed south, staying scrupulously clear of thickets. Our sharpest-eyed African guide lingered behind the rest of us, and we turned our horses around to find out why. The “why” was a female lion he had spotted, lying at a considerable distance in a clearing. To me, with my poor vision, she was only a tawny blur, but to our guides she was an object of fearful fascination. Our head guide radioed the ranger station with his spotting and the location details. Then we moved our horses slowly and calmly in the opposite direction. Maybe a horse can outrun a lion, but who wants to clock it?

For elephants, rhinos, and buffalo, it’s a different story. These are generally peaceful herbivores, albeit with poor eyesight and — in the case of the black rhino — a short temper. If a pachyderm or buffalo charges, we were advised, wait till the last minute to throw yourself to the side. They may be fast enough to catch you on the straightaway, but they tend to go in a straight line so may not turn around to come after you if you sidestep at the last minute.

Not always, however. One of our guides mentioned that someone he knew was killed by a buffalo right in front of his son’s eyes. Father and son were hunting (my quick flash thought: serves them right) and the father spotted a buffalo, shot and grazed him. The animal charged past them — they were standing next to their Land Rover — and seemed to hightail it out of the vicinity. But instead the animal, justifiably enraged, plunged into the bushes, circled around behind the vehicle, and charged the unsuspecting pair from the other side. The father was gorged before he could reach for his rifle, and bled to death in front of his son.

We didn't see buffalo or rhino in Botswana but we did see the latter in South Africa. We were on horseback and our guides there did not carry guns. Why not? "We know the four zones of awareness so we don't have to carry guns," one of the guides explained.

The four zones of awareness when approaching wild animals are: comfort, alert, warning, and critical. Not OURS, mind you, but theirs, the animals' state of awareness. When the animals are comfortable — grazing placidly in the case of a rhino or elephant, or dozing or eating, in the case of a big cat — they are in their comfort zone. No problem observing them from a distance. In the alert stage, the animal is aware of your presence; he may look up from eating, sniff the air, move ears or tail. You should not advance one step closer. In the warning stage, the animal is not only aware of your presence but is sending you a message that you are not welcome: an elephant, for example, will wave ears forward and back and trumpet with the trunk. This can include a mock charge by a rhino or elephant, and we witnessed mock charges by both in the course of our safari. The critical stage is one you should not be observing, because it encompasses the animal's ultimate defense — an attack on you. An elephant or a rhino is about to charge; a lion or big cat about to pounce.

We heard about a Swiss woman tourist who was on a walking safari and disobeyed her guide and got too close to an elephant. Worse, she got between a mother elephant and her calf. Anyone who has seen the cartoon "Dumbo" knows this is a BAD idea. The enraged mother squashed the woman to death, and then, for good measure, picked up the guide with her trunk and sent him flying. He was in the hospital for a couple of months, and faced charges of negligence upon his release.

The rules about zones of awareness also apply for hippo spotting. In spite of their bulk, hippos can move quickly on land, so keep your distance and

1. never get between a hippo and the water

2. NEVER get between a mother hippo and her young.

photo by Marcel Müller

One morning in Botswana, we stopped for our mid-morning break along an elephant trail. We loosened our horses' saddles and tied them to bushes before pouring coffee and tea for ourselves. "If an elephant comes along," instructed our guide, "move slowly to your horses, untie them, and get ready to ride. But don't mount up until I say so because the girths are loose." Right, I thought. And how could the guides possibly tighten all the girths and lead us away quickly enough if an elephant decided we were equus non gratis? Fortunately we didn't have to face that problem, but it definitely added an edge to the coffee break.

We were on edge for a different reason when we crossed the Limpopo River en route from Botswana to South Africa. Since it was winter, the water level was so low that the crossing was made by jeep driving right over the river bed. (In high water periods, a minuscule cable car passes low over the water, taking two passengers at a time, preceded by their luggage).

For decades, crocodiles weren't thought to be a problem in these waters. On the Nile, yes, but not on the Limpopo. Besides, the water level was "too low" for crocodiles, we were told, and crocs are scared of the noise a jeep makes in the water. Then in 2006, a medical professor who was in Botswana for humanitarian reasons was canoeing on the Limpopo with a guide, while his wife and son were in another canoe. A huge crocodile emerged from the water (admittedly much deeper at the time), pulled the good doctor from his canoe, and dragged him under.

Two days later his skull, a leg and an arm turned up along the riverbank. The next day the same crocodile took down a baby elephant. Needless to say, canoeing on the Limpopo was quickly forbidden. Canoeing yes, but rowboating no. The lodge where I stayed had been rowing guests across by boat, in almost the same spot where the doctor had disappeared.

In the lodge itself, we felt quite safe. That's what a 9,000-volt electrified fence will do for you. It's not enough to stop an elephant, but it slows one down, and it's more than enough to cause a lion to rethink (or stop thinking altogether). Plus it prevents the baboons from pursuing any curiosity they might have, and baboons can be pretty dangerous themselves.

A baboon's teeth are more deadly than a Rottweiller's, plus they are powerful and very smart. We were told NOT to stick our heads outside the compound unaccompanied because "it is dangerous out there."

The most dangerous animals, we were told repeatedly, are those who have had some contact with humans — either inappropriately fed by them or raised improperly by them, then re-introduced into the wild. Our guide at a lodge in South Africa had the artery on his leg ripped open by a warthog who had been raised by rangers and whom the guide had handled a thousand times. He lost more than 1.5 pints of blood and almost didn't make it.

A naturalist at the same lodge reported that re-introduced impalas were responsible for four deaths in the early 2000s, with the animals killing the very people who had raised them, sometimes by accident. The deaths occurred for clear, understandable reasons in every case, which had nothing to do with "ingratitude" by the animals and everything to do with stupidity by humans, but that's another story.

Everyone who works in the bush prefers the straightforward threats presented by wild animals to the treachery, duplicity, and malevolent cruelty of human beings.

When we had our orientation on the first day of safari, we all had to fill out indemnity forms. I filled out and handed in my form right away, thinking to myself, "It doesn't matter what I sign. A good American will always sue if something happens." As the lodge manager collected our forms, he said aloud, "All the Americans are the first to hand in these forms. They know they will sue anyway if something happens." I smiled at him (though I would never smile at a crocodile).

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**Written by CFlisi**

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