

Restraint

By Tom Dickson

One evening this past summer I came face to face—actually, face to backside—with a striped skunk. I was taking out a bag of trash and looked down to see it 10 feet away, tail straight up, ready to blast me with a load of stinkshot.

But it didn't. After I froze, the skunk looked over its shoulder and, apparently sensing no threat, dropped its tail and waddled across the street to the neighbor's hedge.

It's curious how often wildlife can harm us but don't. A few weeks earlier, I was walking back to my car after fishing the Missouri River near Craig. I heard the unmistakable sound of a rattlesnake and saw, just a fly rod length away, a coiled prairie rattler on the trail. I veered far around it, my heart pounding from the realization that, had the snake not given us a warning, I or my dog, who follows at heel, could have been bitten.

Or maybe not. I've since talked to several people who, while out hiking or hunting, encountered a rattler well within striking

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distance that chose not to strike.

What I've long thought were lucky breaks I now see as animals deciding not to do their worst. Once while fishing a backcountry creek in Yellowstone National Park, I nearly bumped into a cow moose with a calf behind her. She snorted and backed away, but just as easily—and certainly justifiably—could have charged me with hooves flailing. A few years ago when my wife and I were backpacking in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, we broke camp one morning and I noticed fresh grizzly tracks from the night before. The bear had been following the trail, then moved off when it neared our site. But for the tracks, we'd never have known that the large carnivore had been only a few dozen yards from our tent.

The most remarkable episode of animal restraint I ever witnessed took place one late afternoon in Yellowstone when I and several FWP colleagues in a van reached the high bridge that crosses the Gardner River southeast of Mammoth Hot Springs. A female black bear and her three cubs had tried

crossing the bridge and were surrounded by tourists taking their photos. When other tourists appeared on the far side of the bridge, the mother bear decided to gather her young and turn back—into the pursuing crowd. The park ranger at the scene yelled at the photographers, urging them to move quickly so they would not end up between the bear and her cubs.

"It was the most dangerous situation I've ever seen," the ranger said to us afterward. The mother bear wasn't especially large, but she no doubt felt some threat to her young. Even more perilous was the site of the incident: a high bridge with low side railings. If the bear had even bluff-charged any of the people near the railings, they might have fallen or even jumped off, plunging into the boulder-strewn river several hundred feet below. Watching the scene unfold, those of us in the van held our breath, save for a videographer colleague who sensed a teaching moment worth capturing and jumped out to film a few minutes of the melee (see YouTube link below).

Fortunately, no one was injured. Mom got her cubs off the bridge and the tourists returned to their vehicles and drove off with a harrowing story to tell friends back home.

That mother bear and other human-tolerant wildlife have been on my mind lately as I think about how eroding standards of social discourse have made it increasingly easy for people to harm other people. With a cruel Tweet, spiteful Facebook comment, or cyberbully attack, anyone with a grudge or grievance can lash out and inflict lasting damage to others from the safety of their bedroom or basement. Maybe we could learn a thing or two from all the dangerous animals that so rarely harm us even though they can. If a mama black bear with cubs surrounded by tourists can refrain from attacking people, it shouldn't be so hard for us to do the same. 🐻

See footage of some of the YNP bridge incident at youtu.be/5OrnHISGqi0.



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