

DANGER AROUND EVERY BEND

HOW SPORTING ART'S "PREDICAMENT SCENES" HAVE SHAPED OUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE OUTDOORS

BY TODD WILKINSON

During my life, I've had more run-ins with doom than I can count. I've seen dozens of bear, lion, tiger, elk, elephant, jaguar, rhino, shark, whale, piranha, and leopard attacks. I've watched people engage in mortal tangles with angry crocodiles, agitated moose, and poisonous snakes. I've winced as paddlers, anglers, hikers, and cowboy pack trains contend with every kind of imminent peril.

And I've enjoyed every second of it.

The first grizzly mauling I ever witnessed—well, *almost* witnessed—happened when I was a boy sitting in a small-town barbershop waiting for a buzz cut. In front of me stood a hunter relieving himself in the woods. A gigantic silvertip grizzly appeared out of the shadows. The monstrous bruin towered on hind legs, as fate would have it, between the sportsman and his rifle.

DANGER ON THE TRAIL

H.C. EDWARDS (1868-1922)

Riveted with excitement, believing the hunter was surely a goner, I closed my eyes at the thought and have wondered ever since what became of both man and beast.

It turned out that the barbershop delivered an unending bounty of similar hair-raising episodes. No one actually died or suffered serious harm, because none of those primal melodramas played out in real life.



Instead, they appeared as painted stories—known as “predicament scenes”—adorning the covers of popular hunting and fishing magazines, sporting art calendars, and product advertisements. Occasionally, I’ll still stumble upon these enthralling depictions of outdoors life in antiques stores or garage sales.

Predicament scenes shaped how my impressionable mind thought about the great outdoors. I’m certainly not alone. Several generations of Americans who love the outdoors grew up on predicament scenes and their depiction of the backcountry as a treacherous place filled with dangerous beasts around every bend. That exposure created no small amount of awe for the natural world. It also distorted public perceptions of the large carnivores that loomed so prominently in the artwork. If every grizzly bear or wolf a hunter spotted on the trail was a certain man killer, as so many paintings conveyed, the only logical response was to kill every grizzly, wolf, and other large carnivore that could be poisoned, shot, or trapped. And that’s pretty much what America did.

Predicament paintings were not just ways to thrill readers and sell outdoors gear. They also fueled the nation’s policy of predator extermination. Only in recent years have we begun to rethink that approach and realize that what was depicted on the barbershop calendar didn’t necessarily take place in the real world.

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Masters of impending mayhem

My favorite predicament scene is a harrowing depiction by famed American artist N.C. Wyeth, a prolific painter of the early 20th century. The piece, titled *Alaskan Mail Carrier*, portrays a postman who has trekked solo across a remote frozen lake on snowshoes. Clad only in a light wool jacket, the carrier must have realized he’d been trailed by a pack of hungry wolves. He decides to stand his ground. Unfortunately, ten wolves are rapidly closing in and he’s armed with only a revolver.

Wyeth’s painting—actually conceived to summon our attention to an advertisement—shows the aftermath: Eight wolves lay dead and bloody in the snow, but two more loom menacingly.

What would you do in his place? The artist wants us to fill in the blanks.

Never mind that there’s no record of such an attack ever actually happening. Wyeth’s

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story—and those of all predicament art—are pure fiction. Yet the scenes were remarkably clever visual devices meant to manipulate perceptions and behavior—as potent as any television commercial or pop-up ad on our computers today. “By design, those paintings, carefully choreographed by ad agency art directors, made the wild seem wilder at a time

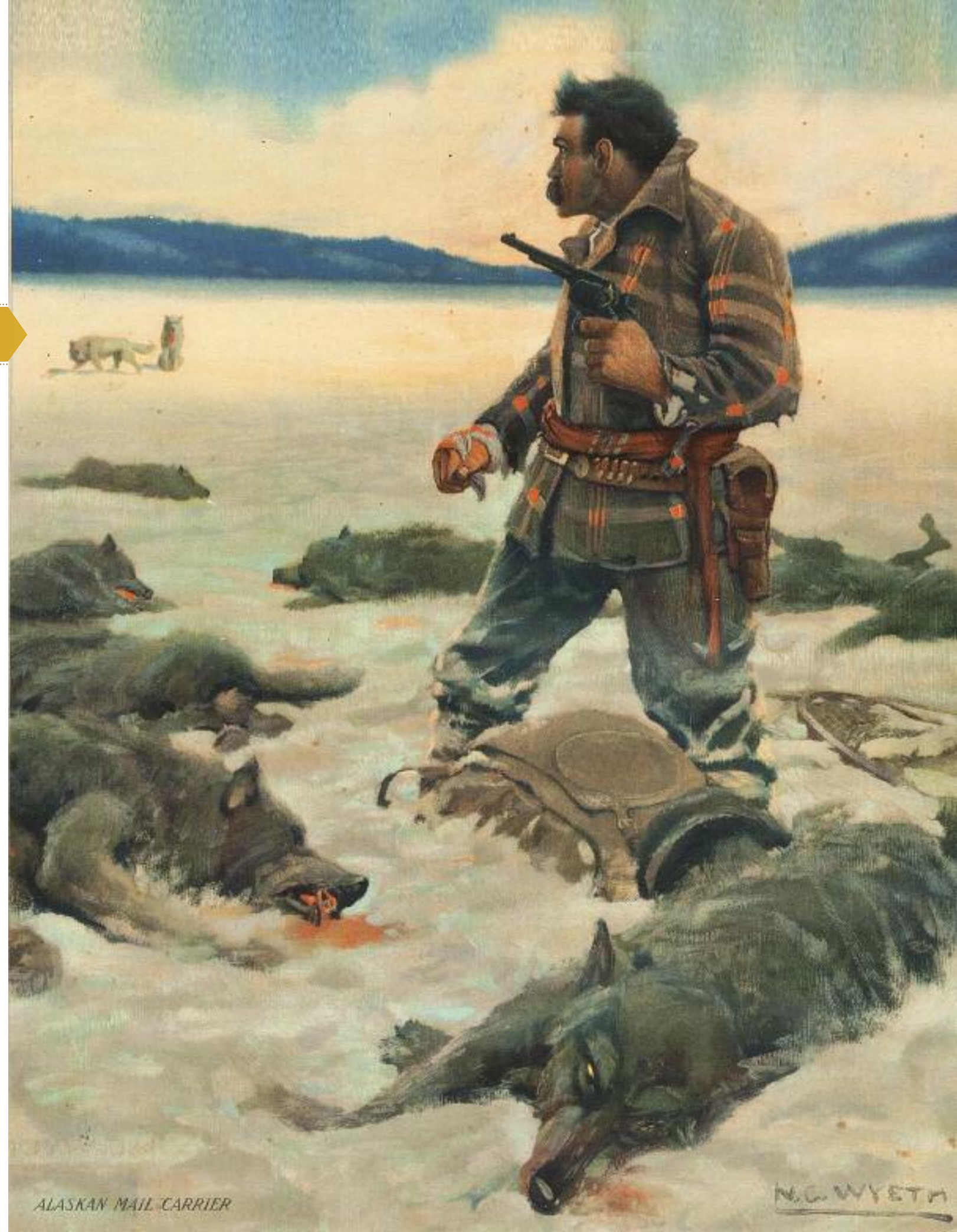
ALASKAN MAIL CARRIER

N.C. WYETH (1882-1945)

when most Americans were living in cities or moving to the suburbs,” the late great art historian Walter A. Reed told me back in the 1990s when I interviewed him for a story on sporting art. “Rather brilliantly,” Reed said, “predicament scenes preyed on our dread of the unknown and led us to believe that, if we really wanted to be safe, we needed the particular product being sold. For example, some ads told us that without a Winchester clutched in our hands, we’d be as good as dead if we happened to run into wolves or grizzlies.”

To ensure that predicament scenes carried emotional punch and impact, New York City advertising firms and their clients—which included gun, ammunition, and outdoors gear and clothing manufacturers—enlisted some of the nation’s top illustrators to create advertising imagery during what’s known as the Golden Age of Illustration, from the 1880s through the 1950s.

For generations, the most prestigious predicament scene assignment was to create pieces for the annual Remington Arms calendar and related advertisements. Among those who held the honor was Bob Kuhn, counted among the greatest animal painters



PREDICAMENT COVERS IN PULP FICTION

HELP! WEASELS! Pulp and men’s adventure magazines of the 1920s through ’50s tantalized readers with “true-life” stories of wild animal attacks. Typical covers depicted nature as savage and terrifying.





Paradoxically, sportsmen influenced by those depictions helped nearly wipe out the very thing they found most thrilling about the outdoors—predators.

who ever lived. I was fortunate to interview him several times before he died in 2007.

Yes, Kuhn told me, some predicament scenes could border on the absurd, but the intention was to give viewers something to talk about. “When we were painting back in

UNTITLED

PHILIP R. GOODWIN (1881-1935)

Connecticut, none of us had actually seen a moose swamping a canoe as it moved through rapids with people in it, nor did any of us personally get attacked by grizzlies, but we did do a lot of asking, ‘What if this happened or that?’ And we made those questions the subjects of our paintings. Sometimes the ideas were our own, and other times they came from art directors or from the client.”

Another master of predicament art was Philip R. Goodwin. Goodwin was an Easterner who designed the horse and rider logo for Winchester Repeating Arms Company and Marlin Firearms and provided illustrations for Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* and Theodore Roosevelt’s *African Game Trails*. He was enlisted by Browning, Remington, and other gun and ammunition manufacturers to create dramatic visual scenarios. Some were slightly over the top, like *The Right of Way*, which depicts a hunter on a cliff coming face to face with a grizzly bear the size of a Clydesdale. Goodwin’s trademarks were canoeists rolling their boats as angry bull moose approached, or bears coming around corners and startling hunters. The artist’s point of view was often to put us behind the subject’s shoulder so that we feel the same emotions as the hapless outdoorsmen in the painting.

Predator perceptions

Though highly entertaining, the often-misleading impressions of outdoors life created by vintage predicament scenes may have unwittingly undermined the nation's conservation movement. Dramatic scenes adorning calendars, posters, and book and magazine covers convinced millions of Americans during most of the 20th century that man-eating grizzlies, wolves, and

cougars lurked around every corner. In fact, those species were fast disappearing from throughout the Lower 48 states.

By the 1970s, wolves had been eradicated from every state except the northernmost portion of Minnesota. Grizzlies were soon to be listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, and cougars were gone from 90 percent of their historic range. Paradoxically, sportsmen helped nearly wipe out

the very thing they found most thrilling about the outdoors.

Not until the past few decades have states begun to re-examine their policies toward predators and allow meat-eaters back onto the landscape. It's taken a long time for people to realize that those calendars on barber-shop walls depicted Easterners' imagination of outdoor life in the West, not what actually occurs here.

Even with restoration of large carnivores in parts of the West, we know today that wilderness travelers have a much higher chance of dying in a car crash on the way to the trailhead than they do of being attacked by a grizzly bear. And that there has never been a documented case of a person being killed by a healthy wild wolf in the Lower 48.

Just as we recognize that no zombies lurk in our basement yet nonetheless love being scared by movies about the living dead, so do we still thrill at artistic depictions of dangerous life outdoors—even while knowing that it's not all that dangerous. Today's sportsmen and sportswomen are no less enthralled by tales and images of outdoor peril than were their counterparts 100 years earlier. And using fear and awe of the outdoors to sell products and publications has diminished only slightly from when America's first sporting magazines featured hunters reaching for their carbine as a mother bear and her two cubs approached the campsite.

As it has since 1940, *Outdoor Life* continues to run its popular "This Happened To Me" page, featuring near-death adventures survived by the magazine's readers. The publication's March 2015 "Danger Issue" warned readers: "Survive the Wild: 7 Essential Skills You Must Learn." In his introduction, editor-in-chief Andrew McKean

A DISPUTED TRAIL

CHARLES M. RUSSELL (1864-1926)

writes, "There are few populations of humans who have more opportunity to join the ranks of disaster victims than hunters, fishermen, and those of us who seek the things that can only be found outdoors, often in the worst weather."

In other words, don't be afraid of venturing out into the natural world—be *very* afraid.



Left to the imagination

One of the most heralded modern purveyors of the predicament scene is British American artist John Seerey-Lester. "I love predicament scenes because, if you do them well, they can make the hair stand up on the back of a viewer's neck," he says. In his painting *Crash*, Seerey-Lester shows a gold prospector awakened by a massive bull moose towering over the campsite. Several of his paintings depict grizzly bears peering into canvas tents at night. Are they just curious, or are they *hungry*?

Yet, as the artist notes, encounters with animals—dangerous or otherwise—are becoming increasingly rare in much of the

world where human population continues to grow and development sprawls across the landscape. "As wildness pulls farther and farther away from the daily lives of the seven

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CRASH

JOHN SEEREY-LESTER (1965-)

billion people on the planet, contact with nature, for most people, is left to the imagination," says Seerey-Lester.

Yes, danger sells. And we can't get enough of it. It stimulates the amygdala, the lizard part of our brains, firing the synapses that determine whether we'll engage in fight or flight. The threat of harm or death—even virtually, as in video games or on sporting magazine covers—causes adrenaline to surge through us, igniting our will to survive.

We love to be scared to death. It makes us feel more alive. 🐾