



Many poisonous snakebites can be avoided by watching where you put your hands. Here, a cottonmouth lies at the bottom of a decoy bag.



# DANGER AFIELD FOR THE TEXAS OUTDOORSMAN

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**S**pend any time in the outdoors and you will have many close encounters of the wild kind. Texas is home to innumerable creatures that can cause harm to the outdoorsman, from large gators to microscopic “flesh-eating bacteria.” Having a basic understanding of creatures that can cause harm is the best preventive medicine a Texas outdoorsman can carry afield.

## THINGS THAT SLITHER

In Texas we are no strangers to venomous snakes, we have them all: 10 species of rattlesnakes, 3 species of copperheads, the western cottonmouth and the Texas coral snake. A hallmark symbol of the rugged west, the western diamondback rattlesnake, is the most widespread venomous snake in Texas and accounts for most of the state’s serious cases of poisoning; a complex, mostly hemotoxic venom that destroys blood and tissue. Although deaths from rattlesnakes are rare, victims may suffer prolonged, even lifelong effects from the bite. On the other hand, dogs have a higher mortality rate, around 20 percent (assuming no immediate veterinary care). Wear snake boots and heavy pants when hiking in snake country, watch where you step, and where you place your hands. Do not try to kill a venomous snake; a large percentage of snakebites come from people trying to dispatch one. If you see what appears to be a dead snake, do not touch it as a snake can strike up to one hour after death.

Another reptile that slithers and raises blood pressure with happenstance encounters is the American alligator, deceptive with docile-like demeanor but armed with torpedo-fast reflexes. I did not really appreciate their speed until my wife and I bumped into a large 12-foot-plus gator in a field. It was a scene right out of Jurassic Park; a monster lizard

elevates on all fours to launch racehorse fast in one direction, while we took the opposite path. In Texas, there have been only a few incidents with gators, none deadly. However, duck hunters in particular should be aware of their environs, especially during early teal season when gators are still actively feeding. In numerous cases a retriever has been killed while fetching a duck. Approaching alligator nests or young hatchlings is a real bonafide risk, as mother gators will often leave the water to pursue intruders with protective fervor.

## UNDER THE WATER

Wade-fish our coastal bays long enough, especially the Matagorda and Galveston Bay complexes, and you will be a firm believer in leg guards, a protective leg wrap designed to protect fishermen from the venomous stinger of the stingray. Accidentally stepping on a bottom dwelling stingray triggers its defensive action; their tail lashes out causing punctures or lacerations with envenomation. The painful stab of the stinger not only does damage, usually to the foot or leg, but the venom causes tissue necrosis. Beachgoers in the ocean surf are also at risk. The spines near the base of the tail are hard and sharp, with backward pointing barbs (retroserrations) that can cause a nasty, jagged cut. The venom is composed of many different substances that cause tissue to break down and die, causing severe pain. It is estimated that there are 1,500 emergency room visits annually for stingray injuries across America. The “stingray shuffle” (shuffling your feet across the bottom) helps avoid stepping on a stingray.

Texas has two saltwater catfish: the hardhead catfish and the gafftopsail catfish. Both have a slime layer covering the dorsal and pectoral fins that is mildly toxic. A





A mother gator protecting her nest or young can cause injury to the intruder.



"Africanized bees or "killer bees" will sting 10 times greater than European honey bees and will pursue trespassers up to a 1/4 of a mile from their hive.

puncture by either catfish will be followed by severe pain and swelling. The fins are also barbed, which makes withdrawal a painful process. I have personally been stung by hardheads twice, both encounters extremely painful. I now exclusively use long fish pliers to deal with hook removals, and so do most fishing guides. Even a dead hardhead catfish can present a hazard to the person who steps on an erect dorsal or pectoral spine.

The "Jaws" angst of 1975 is still alive and well; however, shark attacks are media inflated, with the odds that other animals presented in this article are more likely to injure you. There have been six documented shark attacks in Texas in the last six years, none fatal, with the bull shark being the most common aggressor. When water conditions are right, waders can have some awfully close encounters with sharks. Three such hot spots are the North Galveston Jetty, San Luis Pass and West Matagorda Bay. Having a four-foot black-tipped shark take off with your stringer of specks in chest-deep water is just downright frightful. Over a span of 100 years, there have been only two fatalities in Texas, according to the International Shark Attack File; the first attack (1911) occurred in Galveston Ship Channel when a man attempted to rescue an



overboard companion, and the second attack (1962) occurred in South Texas when a bull shark attacked a fisherman trailing a stringer of fish. Best advice if wade-fishing the bays – have a quick release and a real long stringer!

**BIG WALLOP IN A SMALL PACKAGE**

Africanized honey bees (AHBs, alias “killer bees”) are actually a hybrid of the European honey bee (EHBs) and the African honey bee. Per Texas A&M Apiculture program, the impulses to sting in AHBs is 10 times greater than that of EHBs; the attacks are relentless, last longer and involve more bees. AHBs will patrol a 100-ft radius from the hive and have been known to follow victims as much as a 1/4 of a mile from the hive, whereas EHBs will pursue only about 50 yards. There are one to two deaths annually in the U.S. with anaphylactic shock (a severe allergic response) being the most common reason for death. Both AHBs and EHBs look the same, it is the behavior that sets them apart. An immediate retreat should occur with any aggressive acting bees.

The red imported fire ant is a militarized attacking machine. The attacks are coordinated by released pheromones with dozens, or even hundreds, of workers stinging in unison. The ant only bites in order to get a firm grip so that it can sting you with its abdomen. Fire ants will “ball-up” and actually float on water to escape flooding conditions, often offloading on duck blinds and decoy bags to make one miserable morning for unsuspecting duck hunters. While most people can tolerate many stings, severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) will occur in less than 1 percent of people stung by fire ants.

Chagas is a disease (first reported in Texas in 2013) spread by the nocturnal kissing bug via a bite and defecation (introducing the Chagas parasite) near the site of the bite. Of humans infected with the parasite, approximately 30 percent will have chronic Chagas that includes cardiac and intestinal complications. Dogs infected with Chagas can develop severe heart disease and death. The disease is concentrated along the US/Mexico border, but the disease is spreading. There are currently no vaccines that prevent the disease. Treatments are invariably minimally effective and there is no cure for Chagas disease. More information on Chagas can be found at <http://kissingbug.tamu.edu/>.



Wild hogs, when cornered or injured, can inflict serious injury to the hunter with their razor-sharp tusks.



Red imported fire ants will ball-up to protect the colony during floods.



Texas averages about 20 documented cases of vibrio vulnificus infections and seven deaths each year by the saltwater bacteria. The bacteria thrive in warm water, so concentrations of the bacteria are higher during the summer months. Many of the infections are triggered when a person eats shellfish, usually raw oysters, carrying the bacteria. But other infections begin through simple contact with saltwater, during which the bacteria gains access through a wound or other breaks in the skin. One third of those who contract the bacteria die.

Other invertebrates of concern include mosquitoes carrying West Nile Virus, 18 different species of scorpions that inflict painful stings, ticks carrying numerous diseases such as Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Tularemia, and spiders, which include 14 species of tarantulas, the brown recluse and the black widow.

**LARGE MAMMALS**

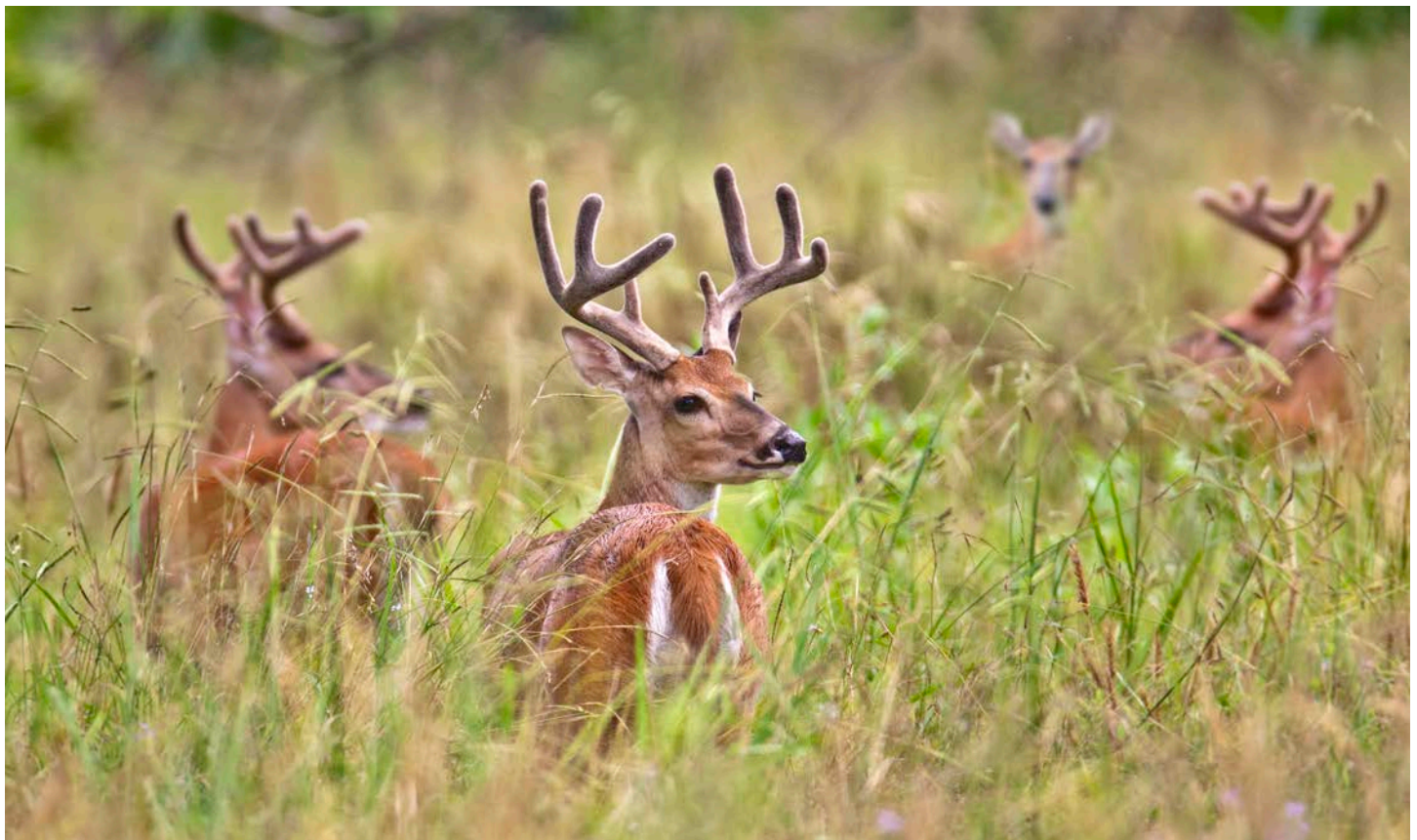
Texas has an estimated 2.6 million feral pigs, with an annual growth rate of 21 percent. Per a Texas A&M AgriLife document, “Feral Hog Population Growth,” it is estimated that hogs may exceed the state’s white-tailed deer

population in less than five years. Human encounters with feral hogs will become even more commonplace, both in rural and urban areas. Feral hogs are like most other wild creatures and would rather flee than fight. But extreme caution should be maintained when tracking wounded animals, as boars have razor sharp defensive tusks that can cause severe injury to both dogs and hunters. Never try to catch or get close to piglets, regardless if you can see larger hogs or not. Mama is always nearby.

Our apex predator is the mountain lion (a.k.a. cougar). Despite increased reports of attacks on people in other parts of North America, cougar attacks are rare in Texas. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department reports that there have only been four cougar attacks in Texas since 1980, all in the remote areas of West Texas. There have been no cougar fatalities in Texas. Across North America there have been 20 fatalities, mostly in areas with a ban on cougar hunting, such as California and Vancouver Island. Cougars have been sighted in all 254 counties of Texas, although not all have been confirmed. The best advice if one encounters

a cougar is not to run and trigger an instinct to attack. If one is attacked, the advice from experts is to fight back.

Texas has over four million-plus white-tailed deer, many of which will cross our highways at one time or another. State Farm Insurance places the odds at one in 333 that a Texas driver will hit a deer, and we are considered a low risk state per a 2011-2012 survey. Tell that to the 5,901 Texans who had vehicle collisions with animals in 2013! Per the Texas Department of Transportation, eleven of those accidents were fatal. Every year across the nation an estimated 1.25 million deer-vehicle crashes result in about 150 human fatalities, with more than 10,000 injuries, and insurance payouts approaching \$4 billion. State Farm data shows that deer collisions are most prevalent in the month of November. Be especially attentive from sunset to midnight, and during the hours shortly before and after sunrise, as these are the highest risk times for deer-vehicle collisions. The white-tailed deer may very well be our most deadly animal in Texas. 🐾



With over 1.25 million deer-vehicle crashes nationwide and over 4 million whitetails in Texas, the deer may very well be our most deadly animal.

