

If the human race could learn one lesson from the last 4.5 billion years, it should be: Never mess with Mother Nature. And for good reason. Mother Nature has packed the planet with deadly animals. Sometimes they come equipped with sharp teeth, long claws, and flexing coils– but surprisingly, it's the smallest of living things that are often the most lethal.

So what are the odds you'll meet your match against a wild thing? According to current research, that depends entirely on where you are. The estimated number of yearly deaths varies dramatically from continent to continent, country to country, and even state to state. It can happen anywhere, at any time. However, more often than not, the culprit is not a lion, tiger, or bear.

When 19th-century European explorers ventured south into the vast, mysterious terrain of Africa and romantically dubbed it “the Dark Continent,” it is safe to say they had no comprehension of just how deadly it actually was.

Stacked up against the rest of the world, Africa leads the way in deaths by animals. Based on estimated number of yearly animal-related deaths and the population, the chances of dying by animal are by far the highest in Africa, with 1 out of every 2,221 people meeting their fate at the horn, jaw, or stinger of a deadly creature, the smallest of which pack the most punch.

Mosquitos, which transmit malaria, are the most dangerous creatures on the planet, and Africa is home to 91 percent of the most year for which such statistics have been gathered: 438,000 malaria deaths. In addition, many Africans fall victim to the sometimes-fatal tsetse fly, which carries African sleeping sickness. Puff adders, ocellated carpet vipers, and deathstalker scorpions are far more deadly than the infamous – albeit herbivorous – hippopotami, which are widely regarded as one of the most aggressive, dangerous animals on the continent (as are elephants, though they paled in comparison to cobras in Asia).

Despite their terrible eyesight, which allows them to be startled easily, rhinoceroses fall low on the list in Africa, as do cheetahs, gorillas, and spotted hyenas. The odds of being killed by one of them are even less than the odds of dying by the No. 1 killer in the United States: deer!

Responsible for an estimated 120 fatalities in the United States every year, deer represent the greatest risk to Americans in animal-related deaths. But deer-related fatalities most often stem from accidents, not vicious attacks. Due to rapid urban development, the deer's natural habitat is shrinking, causing them to share more space with humans, where they often wander into oncoming traffic and cause car crashes. Deer-related crashes are a growing problem across the country that has led to sterilization programs and culling in the Northeast, even in the star-studded Hamptons.

When it comes down to it, not very many people are killed by animals in America, according to the CDC. In fact, the organization suppresses the data in some states – such as Maine, Nevada, and Hawaii – where the number of deaths are so low that publishing the statistics would allow people to possibly determine an exact figure and perhaps the identities of the individuals involved. Excluding these states, the states with the lowest odds of dying by animal are on the East Coast, with Massachusetts's ratio of 1 to 8 million topping the list.

On the other end of the spectrum, Montana is the most dangerous state when it comes to deadly animals: 1 in 674,600 Montanans will meet their death by animal. After all, the Northwest is home to the Rocky Mountains and its population of bears, cougars, spiders, rattlesnakes, and – you guessed it – deer. Be careful not to approach them or any other hooved creatures. Bison, for example, may look friendly and cuddly, but you risk being gored if you approach a 2,000-pound, territorial adult with a young calf nearby.

When it comes to man versus beast, what animal is most likely to win out? Research shows that it is mammals such as horses, cows, and deer – followed closely by stinging insects, such as hornets, wasps, and bees. It was an experiment gone wrong that created the genetically mixed “killer bee,” a cross between European and African honeybees that has spread throughout the Americas. Killer bees are experts at swarming and have been known to chase their prey for miles.

Man’s best friend comes in third – which is not all that surprising, considering canines are essentially domesticated wolves.

Quite a few states fall outside the national average in certain animal-related deaths. While Texas is scorpion country and a place where we might expect to see high mortality rates, venomous arthropods are also top killers in North Carolina.

Surprisingly, your chance of being crushed or bitten by reptiles is highest in Missouri and Illinois. And you should worry as much about venomous snakes and lizards in Georgia as you should in California. Dog bites are more common in the Northeast but are also prevalent in Alabama and Arizona.

Notably absent from the map are fish, including sharks – arguably one of the most feared creatures in the sea – notoriously clearing beaches after a sighting of one offshore or a screening of “Jaws” too close to bikini season. In reality, less than one person per year is killed by a shark in the United States.

Fear is a normal reaction to these deadly creatures – and a decidedly human one too. Fear is what keeps us alert, distant, and hopefully safe from dangerous animals.

But if life-threatening situations arise, it is important to consider that these animals are simply acting how nature intended – to protect, to hunt, and to survive. For that, they deserve respect and admiration, never vilification. Chances are the animals you fear the most are the least likely to hurt you. They have no reason to bite us unless they’re threatened as we pose a greater threat to them than they do to us.

So let's look at the big picture. We know mosquitos can be fatal, but just how fatal? Comparatively, they are even more deadly to mankind than mankind itself; homicide claims 475,000 people every year, but that's only half the mosquito death toll.

Mosquitos are the ultimate serial killers: small and stealthy, often going undetected as they transmit any number of horrific diseases. Most recently, mosquitos have snared headlines because of the mosquito-borne Zika virus, an epidemic associated with miscarriages and birth defects that has spread past its previous holdings in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands.

[Last year](#) marked the first outbreak in Brazil and, to date, [157 women have tested positive for Zika](#) in America. Although no one has been infected from a mosquito bite within the continental United States, some experts worry that it is only a matter of time.

After mosquitos, snakes easily qualify as the next-most-deadly animals, with the Asian cobra leading the pack.

Found predominantly in tropical Asia – from India through China and Indonesia, as well as the Middle East – the cobra can range from 4 to 7 feet long and typically feeds on small mammals. Though it rarely attacks humans, [except during mating season](#), its poison is neurotoxic and can cause death as soon as [15 minutes after the bite](#).

The seemingly innocent freshwater snail is responsible for an estimated 10,000 human deaths per year, thanks to the parasitic infection associated with it called schistosomiasis, or “snail fever.”

Because of their sheer size, mammals might seem like the most obvious class of deadly animals, but they are the least likely to kill you. Snakes are more deadly, by far, in their class. And arthropods are also accomplished killers, with the innocuous-sounding kissing bug topping their ranks. Don't let the friendly nickname fool you. These [penny-sized insects](#) can carry Trypanosoma cruzi, a parasite that causes Chagas disease. They feed on blood at night, preferably around human eyes and mouths – hence the word “kissing” in their name.

However, the dark horse in the animal kingdom is definitely the parasite class, an astonishingly effective and sometimes undetectable predator, nearly invisible to the naked eye and credited with nearly a million human deaths per year. Plasmodium – the parasite that [causes malaria](#) – is only transmitted by female mosquitoes of the Anopheles genus, and is singlehandedly responsible for the [creation of the CDC](#).

Never Fear

Methodology

We researched lists of the top deadliest animals in the world and the estimated number of yearly fatalities each species had caused. In some instances, we created estimated average yearly deaths by dividing the number of fatalities over a span of years. Data for the maps of the United States were taken from CDC WONDER animal-related causes of death.