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opening extract from

Stuff That Scares Your Pants Off !

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1 Wild and Scary Wildlife



The Fears You're Born With and the Fears You Learn

Some people scream at the sight of snakes and spiders. Others keep huge ones as pets, and let them slither or scuttle all over them while they watch TV. Hardly anyone, however, would be happy to see a tiger or bear charging at them through a forest. And anyone who giggles underwater bubbles at the razor-filled maw of a shark clearly has something wrong with them.* There are some fears, it seems, that some folks can 'switch off', while others mean 'new underpants, please' for almost everybody.

So how does this come about? Are you just *born* afraid

* Or, perhaps, laughing gas in their scuba tank.

of certain things like sharks, snakes and spiders? Or are you born fearless, and only later learn to be afraid as you grow up and experience scary things for yourself?

The answer is, it's actually a little of both.

Humans and other animals seem to be born with some fears, which we call inborn (or *innate*) fears. These include the dark, loud noises and sudden movements. Some animals are also born with the fear of a specific predator. Mice, for example, are born fearing cats and foxes, which makes perfect sense, if you think about it. Mice born without a fear of the things that hunt them probably don't survive long in the wild. So the foolishly fearless mice have been weeded out and killed off (an example of *natural selection*), leaving only cat-and-fox-phobic mice behind to survive and thrive.

Similarly, many of the things humans are commonly scared of seem connected to our survival as a species. A healthy fear of thunder and lightning probably helped keep our ancestors alive during thunderstorms, as the crack and boom sent them running for cover. (Once there, they were less likely to find themselves caught out in the open – as the tallest, most zappable objects around – see page 56.) Likewise, a healthy fear of large predators (like bears and tigers) or potentially poisonous animals (like snakes and spiders) would surely have helped them survive in the wild too.

Our brains haven't evolved that much in the last 10,000 years. In fact, they're largely the same now as they were in our Stone Age ancestors. This helps explain why people

living in modern cities would still be so scared of tigers and snakes, even though most of them have never even seen them outside of zoos, much less been attacked by them. In a way, our brains are wired or preprogrammed to fear prehistoric threats, not modern ones like fast cars and fast food.

But that can't be the whole story either. Otherwise, everyone would be born afraid of the same things, and no one would be afraid of more 'modern' things like aeroplanes and lifts, when clearly some people are. Nor would it explain rarer phobias of seemingly harmless things, like *dendrophobia*, the fear of trees, or *alektorophobia*, the devastating fear of chickens.*

In fact, beyond a few, universal fears – like the dark, loud noises and sudden movements – most human fears are either completely learned from experience, or are developed into full-blown fears from *predispositions* (or fear 'leanings') that we're born with. So instead of being born *totally* afraid of snakes, spiders or bears, you're actually born afraid of certain shapes and types of movement. Then how you react to each animal depends on what you experience, and what you see and learn from those around you.

Here's how it works. Young monkeys, apes and human children can all instantly recognize the linear, slithering motion of a snake. But how they react to it depends on whether or not the snake bites them, and how others

* Even, believe it or not, frozen and cooked ones.

around them react when they see one. If the snake bites, or someone around the baby freaks out, then the youngster is afraid for life. If not, they'll think of snakes as harmless until shown otherwise. Similarly, a charging bear or tiger makes a huge, fast-moving shape which will startle anyone. But children don't learn to fear bears and tigers specifically until they're attacked by one or (much more often) told that they attack people.*

And right there is the key to putting the fear of a dangerous animal in its proper place. Often we develop the fear of an animal because we're *told* it's dangerous, because we've heard a scary story about one, or because we've seen the frightened reactions to animals of our parents and friends as we grow up.

Many wild animals, to be sure, should never be messed with. But that doesn't mean they're necessarily looking to *mess with us*. Compared to the other dangers of modern life, very few people are ever harmed or killed by wild animals. If you understand that – plus a little about animal behaviour – then you need never be terrified of an animal again.

Even the dreaded evil chicken.



* Think about it – ever hear the story *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* when you were little? A nasty slur on porridge-loving bears everywhere, that one . . .