

Episode 178: John was attacked by a tiger

On this podcast we've covered well over 170 crazy true stories, and several of those have been about animal attacks.

I've had guests on who have been attacked by a rattlesnake, large dogs, an alligator, a monkey, a grizzly bear, an elephant, yellow jackets, and a shark.

But we've never talked to a victim of a tiger attack – until today.

Ironically, John was working in Russia as part of a conservation effort to protect tigers and other wild cats when this happened.

And the only thing he had to protect himself from the lunging tiger was a road flare.

Scott

When this happened, you were the director of something called the Siberian Tiger Project. What was that?

John

Yeah. The Siberian Tiger Project was a project capturing and radio-tracking Siberian tigers for the purpose of collecting ecological and population data on tigers that we could use to help develop or help the Russian government develop conservation plans for tigers.

Scott

All right. This happened in 2009. How old were you at that time?

John

I was 43 years old and I'd been living in Russia since 1995.

Scott

Let's set the scene for where this happened. You were camping. How remote was this area and where was it?

John

It was a pretty remote area in far southeastern Russia, so near the border with North Korea and China. In fact, we could walk to the Chinese border from our camp and it was at the end of a— I don't even know if you could call it a road, but a really long rough dirt road that took about five hours to drive there. We had a four-wheel drive vehicle with winches and sometimes a Russian military-style vehicle, just to get in there.

Scott

What was a typical day?

John

So we were capturing tigers and leopards in order to fit them with radio collars. We'd set up a remote camp - a fairly large camp with a cook tent, a shower tent, and all that. We're going to be there for about two months. So, from our campsite, we had three different trap lines going out that we would check every day. The way we captured tigers was in these cable foot snares - a piece of aircraft-grade cable that's attached to a tree at one end has a loop at the other end that

sits over a spring so that when the tiger steps through the loop onto the spring would pull the snare up and tight around the tiger's leg. On every snare, we had a radio transmitter and we would monitor for the signals from those transmitters 24/7. So if we got a signal in the middle of the night, we'd go hike into the woods to check the snare and see if we caught something.

Scott

Okay, so the idea was to immobilize the tiger– or maybe not immobilize - that might not be the right word, but to trap the tiger or the leopard to put a radio collar.

John

Yes, that's correct. So when we got an animal in a snare, we'd have to go in and use a dart gun to shoot it with an anesthesia dart - that's the immobilized part. Well, immobilized is correct too. We usually say anesthetized or immobilized.

Scott

You were the leader of this group. How many were on your team?

John

Correct, yeah. Including myself, there were six of us normally in camp, and the reason for that was– we needed at least six people because even though we had radio transmitters on the snares, every day in the morning, we would go out and check our snare lines just to be sure in case something went wrong and we had an animal and the transmitter didn't work. So, we always did that in pairs just for safety reasons.

Scott

Yeah, because you don't want an animal that's trapped and no one attending to it or you not knowing about it.

John

Correct.

Scott

Okay. That day, you started out at a disadvantage because you were shorthanded. What was going on there?

John

Correct. One of my students had to go to Vladivostok to take exams. She had left the day before, took her exams that morning, and came back that evening, so we were short one person. That meant that one of us had to go alone to check the snares or to check one snare line. Me being the most experienced person on the team, I chose to go by myself to check my snare line.

Scott

Yeah, that's logical. You wouldn't have changed that decision looking back on it, right?

John

Oh, not at all. In fact, that morning when I got up and stumbled into the cook tent bright and early before my coffee, one of my other students asked me, "Hey, John, can I go check the—" we called it the road line because it went down an old logging road. "Can I check the road line today?" And I said, "Sure, Dina, whatever." A few minutes later, I remembered, no, we're short a

person and the road line was the easiest line, so that was the one that would be checked by me alone. So I said, "No, you can't go alone to check a snare line. You don't have enough experience yet." And she got kind of upset about that but, later, was very happy that I had made that decision.

Scott

So that was a critical decision on your part. I mean, you understood the safety aspect of it but didn't know what would happen. What was the weather like that morning?

John

Oh, it's a beautiful day. Autumn in the Russian Far East is kind of like autumn in New England here in the US - just beautiful. You get those really nice, crisp, clear fall days. Temperature's just below freezing, so we had the leaves changing, beautiful reds and golds. I remember the maple leaves - the beautiful Japanese maples - just got really fiery red and their leaves were edged with a nice frost. Just a wonderful day. Not a breath of wind.

Scott

And there was another factor in this equation. There were some visitors in the camp.

John

Yes. My wife and my one-and-a-half-year-old daughter. Irina, my wife, and Nina, my daughter, were in camp visiting. I obviously didn't take them to check snares. They stayed back in camp while we were out checking snares.

Scott

And that's one of the unusual aspects of this because each team going out to check a snare had a radio. You couldn't communicate with the other teams. Is that right?

John

That's correct. In some cases, we could. But with walkie-talkie communication, it has to be within line of sight. So if somebody's over a ridge or something like that, you may not hear them, but all teams could communicate back to camp. So Irina had a radio in camp and she would coordinate among teams in case any calls came in.

Scott

Okay. So she could relay messages between if you needed and that kind of thing. So you got your coffee. You started walking down the road. Can you just take us through what happened?

John

Yeah. So it's, like I said, a beautiful morning. I've got my coffee in my hand and you're not expecting to catch anything in this situation. There were no signals from the transmitters. In a two-month session, we're happy if we catch one tiger. So the chances of having anything in a snare is really slim. So I was just kind of wandering down the trail, enjoying a nice beautiful morning.

Scott

How far away was it?

John

It was about two kilometers, so maybe a half-hour walk one way. I was kind of wandering along with my coffee enjoying the day. Such a lovely way to start the day - taking your coffee on a short walk in a beautiful forest.

Scott

I almost feel silly asking this, but do you have any sense of doom or something not quite right? Anything like that?

John

Nope, absolutely not. Just a typical day like any other day going out to check the snares. You go out, check the snares, and there's nothing there. You come back, meet with the team, and have breakfast.

Scott

So checking was— you almost look at it kind of like a formality.

John

Yeah. It was a box-ticking exercise, really. So I was walking down the trail. As I approached the last snare, before I could see it, I heard a growl. I knew immediately that we had a tiger. I thought, "Wow, great. We've got a tiger!" So I stopped and put my coffee down. I needed to approach that tiger, get a look at it, and see what we had, so that I could go back to camp, meet with the team, and we would go and anesthetize the animal. But I needed to know, was it a male, was it a female, and how big was it so that we could calculate the drug dosage. So I put my coffee down.

I carried a flare with me for safety. It's a marine signal flare that you pull a string and it lights, but it doesn't shoot a flare into the air - it just burns in your hand. So, if an animal is attacking you, you can hopefully hold it out and divert the charge. So I got my flare ready and started to approach the snare. When I was about 40 yards away, maybe, the tiger did what pretty much all tigers do in a snare. When you approached it, he jumped up and tried to run away. Immediately, I thought, "Oh wow, it's a nice male tiger. Great." I was already starting to back away. I didn't want to stress the animal out any more than needed. Of course, when he tried to run away, he hit the end of the snare and he came up short, kind of like a dog hitting the end of his chain.

Scott

Let me ask you just for a second. You said that you had this flare and that was for your defense, but how could a trapped tiger be a threat to you? I mean, was there a chance it could escape the trap? Were you considering that possibility?

John

Yeah, there's always a chance they can escape the trap. There's always the chance that maybe you've got a cub in the trap and its mom was the one that was growling at me. There's all kinds of things that can happen. And then, there are bears and leopards out there, so you never really know what you're going to meet. But, really, our biggest concern is the tiger popping out of the trap and coming after us.

Scott

So you could see that it was an adult male tiger. How big? What would you estimate the weight?

John

Adult males would run 375 up to— the biggest we ever caught was 450 pounds. So probably around 400 pounds.

Scott

That is huge.

John

Yeah. They're big animals.

Scott

Wow. He tried to run away, then what?

John

Then he did what all tigers do and they can't run away, so he turned around and he charged. And that was expected. I expected to see him hit the end of the cable and come up short, but he didn't. I recognized immediately that he didn't hit the end of the cable and he was coming for me. I popped my flare and they burned quite quickly but, for me, time really just slowed down. Here's the situation I've been dreading for the past more than 10 years. It's happening now and it was happening while I was alone in the woods. So I popped my flare and was holding it out in front of me fizzling and sparking.

Well, here comes this tiger just coming for me with all his might. Huge platter-sized paws just reach out for me with every lunge. Claws extended, popping his jaws and making this kind of roar, roar, roar sound. And three-inch-long canines. He's trying to look as fierce as he can and displaying all his weaponry as he's coming at me, and my only thought was. "He's not stopping." I had been charged by Tigers a number of times before and I knew this was the real thing. This was no bluff. He was not going to stop. I didn't think my flair was going to deter him. So he was just lunging towards me and my flare finally got going, and I was holding it out in front of me.

Very briefly, he finally just kind of disappeared behind the flame of the flare but, just as quickly, reappeared through the flame of the flare, kind of like a circus tiger jumping through a flaming hoop and then bam, 400 pounds of tigers probably moving 35 miles an hour just slammed right into my chest. He carried me about 10 yards back and just slammed me into the ground and then I was lying on my back. He was literally standing on my shoulders. I have a scratch on my left shoulder from that and roaring right into my face, so I put my left hand up kind of defensively and he just started biting it just like a stapler, just bite. I feel bones crunching. I don't remember feeling pain at the time, but it was pretty nasty. But I realized I still had my flare on my right hand. So I took my flare and I kind of jammed it up under his chin. I didn't want to hit him in the eye and risk blinding him or something or really injuring him. I just jammed that flare up under his chin, the side of his face.

Scott

I got to ask you about that part because a 400-pound tiger is on top of you biting your hand and you're thinking, "Where should I put the flare? I don't want to blind him." It seems like such a sense of awareness that I wouldn't imagine that anyone would have in that adrenaline-filled situation.

John

Yeah, well, it came from two things and, really, I wouldn't even say I was thinking. I don't remember conscious thoughts going through my mind as that was happening. It was just instinct. Having thought about this situation over and over again for the past— I've been doing this for the past 14 years. So it was just instinct and two things. 1) I have a passion for protecting wildlife. I don't want to hurt them. 2) The only thing worse than being attacked by a tiger is being attacked by a wounded tiger. So if I jammed it into one of his eyes, I've got a half-blind tiger. That's probably not going to be a better situation for me. It's probably going to be worse. So. That's where I was coming from.

Scott

So you got the flare and you were, how did you use it?

John

I just jammed it up under the side of his chin and, as soon as that flare hit him, he just took off running just as quickly as he came and he was gone. It was equally as impressive watching him run away. He ran up an almost vertical slope and just the power and speed with which he did that was mind-blowing. But then the tiger's gone. So I stood up to assess my injuries - of course, my hand was most immediate. I looked at that and I kind of thought, "Well, that looks pretty bad, but it's not life-threatening. It's not really bleeding very much."

I felt a sting on the inside of my left thigh and I thought, "My gosh, femoral artery." I looked down. There was a rip in my pants but no blood, so I didn't even bother trying to look any further at that. I thought, "My gosh, I'm okay. I didn't really expect to survive this." I was just pumping with adrenaline and adrenaline makes you fight or flight. Well, I started with fight but the tiger's gone, so the fight turned to flight and I just turned around and ran. Again, I was not really even thinking much. What if he comes back? What if there's another tiger around? What if I was wrong and it's really a female, and she's got cubs that she's trying to protect? Something like that. So I just took off running down the trail.

Scott

Do you think you were in shock at that time?

John

Not really. By that time, I think when the tiger was charging me, nothing was going on in my mind which contrasted with other times I'd been charged where a lot was going through my mind. The only thought I really had was "He's not stopping." But by that point, a lot was going through my mind.

I was thinking about all these things but, as I was running down the trail and I started to get outta breath, I did start to become shocked and I started to get lightheaded and the world was starting to kind of— the periphery of my vision was kind of graying in and closing in around me. I thought, "Oh my gosh, I just survived a tiger attack and now I'm going to go into shock and die out here in the woods alone after surviving a tiger attack. This can't happen." So I stopped and I put my head down between my legs to try to increase blood flow to my brain and I just started yelling just to try to bring myself around, which worked pretty quickly. Within probably 15 seconds or 30 seconds, I was okay again.

So, I stood up and just started walking down the trail quickly. Irina was back in camp and she's waking up in the tent, changing Nina's diapers, and hears all this yelling, so she immediately jumped on the radio and said, "What's all the yelling in the forest?" The other two teams

immediately responded, "What do you mean yelling? We don't hear anything." But I'd lost my radio in the fight for the tiger so, of course, I didn't respond. So, she just panicked, got Nina's diaper on, and went running out of camp. So I was about 200 yards from camp coming down the trail and here came Irina and Nina or Nina bouncing on her shoulders running down the trail towards me and I was like, "It's okay."

Scott

Man. But what if you were being chased by the tiger at the time?

John

Right. It's definitely not the situation that you want. Fortunately, I wasn't, so it was all good. And we walked back to camp.

Scott

So what's the first step? Obviously, you need medical attention and the other teams still weren't at camp, right?

John

They got back to camp pretty quickly. We had a veterinarian on the team. We always had a veterinarian with us when doing capture work and he was a good friend, John Lewis. He immediately took care of my hand, did the basic first aid that he could on my hand, and then got in the vehicle and drove into the hospital in Vladivostok to get properly cared for.

Scott

How far away is the hospital?

John

It took us five or six hours probably to get there mostly because the road was so bad. Distance-wise, it was probably, I don't know, less than 100 miles.

Scott

That's still a long way to go when you're in pain. Or how much pain were you in at that time?

John

I was in a lot of pain and John Lewis later made fun of me. He's like, "Yeah, Goodrich, you weren't very stoic" because, when he was doing the bandaging up my hand, I was yelling. That pain kind of subsided but I was still in a lot of pain the whole trip but, by that point, it wasn't that big of a deal.

Scott

I'm trying to picture if your injuries were different, if you had a broken leg and went 100 miles over bumpy roads, that would have been 10 times worse probably.

John

Yeah, and if that were the situation, we might have considered calling in a helicopter, which would have been an option for us.

Scott

You're going to a Russian hospital. I have no idea— what would you expect there? Or did you know what to expect?

John

I knew more or less what to expect because my wife had suffered a really bad bus accident actually in the run-up to our first date and she spent a couple of—

Scott

Sounds like a whole other story there.

John

Oh my gosh. Yeah, it is a whole nother story. She spent a couple of months in the hospital with a broken neck, so I was intimately familiar with the medical system in that hospital in Vladivostok. I knew the hospital would be dirty, I knew it would be disorganized, but I also knew that they had some pretty good doctors. I could have flown back to the US to get medical attention but, after the initial assessment at the hospital and a proposal from a doctor to how he wanted to deal with my hand, I was okay with staying in Russia to have the work done.

Scott

What was the actual assessment of your hand? Obviously, broken bones. I mean, were they able to make it functional again?

John

Yeah, well, the way things worked at the hospital, I started out with going to essentially the emergency room where I was assessed by a young doctor who was just doing the quick assessment. What do we need to do with you? Triage. Yeah, kind of the triage, which was pretty amusing. I stood in a long line, waited my turn, and went in.

“What happened to you?”

“I was attacked by a tiger.”

So he looked over my hand and said, “Do you have any other injuries?” And we're just sitting in chairs, so I said, “Yes, it's got something on the inside of my thigh.”

“So, okay, let's see.”

So I pulled my pants down and the first thing he said was, “Wow. I'm impressed. Your underwear is clean.”

Scott

He didn't expect to see that after the attack, huh?

John

Yeah. He was a bit of a comedian, but it really broke the ice and made me feel at ease. But yeah, there was just a small laceration on the inside of my thigh, so he sent me off to be treated. So then I had to go into an initial surgery where I guess they first x-rayed my hand, but then they got in there and did some initial cleaning up. For that, they actually anesthetized me with ketamine, which was a drug that I was very familiar with using on tigers and, before that, in different research projects badgers and bears. I'd literally anesthetized hundreds of animals with ketamine so I was very familiar with it and knew how safe it was. Of course, going under

anesthesia in a foreign hospital is a little bit scary but that really helped put me at ease because I knew what I was up against and that it's really hard to kill somebody with ketamine.

Scott

You had some interaction with the nurses there.

John

As I was lying on the table and they were preparing to do the initial work on my hand, the nurses were flirting with me and all, "Oh, an American, he was attacked by a tiger. How exciting." This is so typical of my previous experiences in Russia. It just kind of made me laugh and I just kind of went along with it and had fun with it. There's nothing more to it than that, but it made it kind of fun. Then, I was able to talk with the anesthesiologist about the ketamine and ask him if there was anything else in there or anything like that and told him of my experiences, so that was kind of nice. And then they put me under and did the initial cleanup of my hand. There were some bone fragments missing but they just did the best they could. But before they did surgery to really repair my hand, they wanted to wait for a couple of weeks to ensure that there was no infection, so they put me on heavy antibiotics and really made sure that we were past any danger of infection before they went in there and ultimately did another surgery. They had to take some bone from my hip and transplant it into my hand and then I ended up with a titanium splint. The tiger had bitten clean through my hand five or six times, so it was pretty messed up.

Scott

So you had to leave and then you went back to camp two weeks later?

John

Yeah, I actually spent several days in the hospital - I don't remember how many - and then left the hospital and went back out to camp. They had brought in another person in my place to help keep running the snare lines. I went back out and worked for another week or so and then went back in and had the surgery on my hand.

Scott

Was the surgery successful?

John

Yeah, not 100%. Like I said, the doctor— I felt I was confident with him, I felt like he was really good, and I felt like he knew what he was doing and would do a good job with it, and he did. I've since had it examined by a doctor in the US who said, "Yeah, he did a bang-up job." But where things fell apart was the follow-up. What I really needed was some fairly rigorous physical therapy to get my hand working 100% again and it could have happened that way, but it didn't. He didn't follow up. He gave me some kind of vague instructions. But what happened was that the knuckle in my ring finger ended up freezing because I didn't go through physical therapy to get it bending again. So that knuckle is frozen but I kind of figure that - getting attacked by a 400-pound tiger - if that's all I have to live with, that's fine.

Scott

Is it the knuckle at the base of your finger or?

John

Yep.

Scott

Okay. So is your finger just locked in the open position or is it locked down?

John

Well, that knuckle is locked in the open position because I've had a splint on it for several weeks holding that finger out straight.

Scott

Okay. So you just can't bend that finger.

John

Yeah.

Scott

It sounds to me like if you didn't have that flare in your right hand, you probably wouldn't be here today.

John

I would probably be dead almost certainly, absolutely.

Scott

That's amazing. And I wouldn't think of that as being the primary defense against a huge tiger. You don't want to use a gun, obviously. You don't want to kill the animal. But yet, using a flare like that, since it doesn't shoot anything, you've got to be within arm's length of the attacker for it to be effective, but you were aware of that though.

John

Yeah, normally I would carry both a can of bear spray and a flare. I didn't have my bear spray because Irina and Nina were alone back in camp, so I'd left my bear spray with her, just in case. So all I had was my flare, but that was my normal setup - to have a bear spray and a flare - every time I was going out into the field regardless of whether we were trapping or whatever because there's always a chance— there are tigers there, there are brown bears, there are Asiatic black bears, there are leopards and wild boar, so a lot could go wrong.

I always thought that pepper spray would be good at deterring a charge. It sprays about seven yards out in front of you and, hopefully, that would turn a tiger. Actually, I used it on tigers twice successfully prior to that, so I knew that it worked. I always thought the flare might not be as good of a deterrent but it would be a good weapon if you've got an animal on top of you and you're having a fight and you need to defend yourself and, indeed, it turned out that it was superb for that.

There were times during the project when the Russian government actually required us to carry a gun with us for protection. I didn't like the guns, not only because I didn't want to have to kill an animal, but because I wasn't confident in my or anyone else's ability to make that shot because if you got an animal charging you, you need to kill it because, like I said before, the only thing worse than being attacked by a healthy animal is being attacked by a wounded animal. Making that kill shot, which requires you to put a bullet in the head of an animal that's coming at you at 30 miles an hour, takes good marksmanship, a bit of luck, and nerves of steel. So I was much more comfortable with a flare and a pepper spray.

Scott

With a firearm– the adrenaline factor seems like that would reduce accuracy substantially.

John

I'd imagine, yeah. You'd need someone really solid in that situation.

Scott

Your work today is with an organization, Panthera. What is that?

John

Yeah. Panthera is a medium-sized NGO and the only organization in the world that is entirely dedicated to protecting the world's 40 wildcat species.

Scott

So what's a typical day like for you now?

John

Lots of meetings. I started with Panthera as their Tiger program director. When I was doing that, it was lots of travel to different tiger range states, helping to set up projects to do, helping to implement and run projects for tiger conservation to help protect tigers. More recently, I've become chief scientist for Panthera, so I do quite a bit of travel traveling around the world to different countries where we have projects, and lots of time in meetings, both online and in-person.

Scott

This is just from my own curiosity but I saw something that you wrote– you mentioned a connection between wildcats and climate change. What is that connection?

John

The connection between wildcats and climate change and how we can use wildcats to help us mitigate climate change is that wildcats are a great indicator species and they're great ambassadors for conservation. What do I mean by indicator species? Cats require very large areas. For example, to contain a viable population of tigers in Southeast Asia, you're looking at thousands of square miles of habitat needed - contiguous, healthy habitat - to protect a tiger population. So if you've got thousands of square kilometers of rainforest, with a healthy tiger population, you know that most of the other species in that rainforest are also doing well. You have a really nice big chunk of forest, so you're protecting biodiversity, and you're protecting those carbon stocks that are held in that forest, and the value of the forest in pulling carbon out of the atmosphere.

Beyond that, tigers and wild cats in general are also good, what we call, flagship species. People love cats. People love tigers. Tigers, indeed, were voted by– it was a survey run, I think, by the BBC probably 20 years ago now. In lots of different countries, tigers were voted the most favored animal in that survey above and beyond domestic dogs and domestic horses. So here you have an animal that the public can really get behind. It's hard for the public, it's hard for governments to really get behind complex issues like climate change and biodiversity and to really understand how to address those issues. If we can package all that into tiger conservation, for example, then you're really simplifying the equation, especially for governments that have to implement the measures. But if you can go to them and say, "Listen, if you have healthy tiger populations throughout all the existing habitats in your country, you're

doing it. It means you've got the climate protection you need, you've got the biodiversity protection that you need in place, and it's working.”

And then, for all the signatories to climate treaties to biodiversity treaties, they have to monitor that and show that they are making progress towards those climate goals or towards those biodiversity goals. Well, if you're talking about biodiversity, are they going to go out and count every species of plant and animal out there to show that their populations aren't declining? No. If they can go out and count tigers, which we're very good at and know how to do, that can be a good proxy to show that other species are healthy and doing well in the forest. It's healthy.

Scott

So that's the indicator factor that goes right into it. Okay. Yeah. I read that over the last hundred years, tigers have decreased globally from around 100,000 to about 4,500. Just seems drastic and alarming. Is that starting to turn around now or is it still going down?

John

It is starting to turn around and it is drastic and alarming. Tigers are an endangered species. They were really on the brink of extinction. Thanks to really two decades of strong efforts by governments and nongovernmental organizations like Panthera, we seem to have turned the tide, at least for parts of tiger range. So tigers are doing pretty well in South Asia - India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Not doing as well is Southeast Asia - that's the area where we're still most concerned. Since the turn of the century, tigers have gone extinct in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, but we still have tigers in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia on the island of Sumatra. We still have tigers in those countries, and it seems like we're turning the tide in those countries and tiger numbers are more or less stable, at least in Malaysia and Thailand.

Tiger numbers are still very low in Southeast Asia, and we're very concerned, and the reason for that is habitat loss and poaching. The most urgent threat right now is poaching of tigers largely for the traditional Chinese medicine market. Poaching is so bad, it is the reason that we lost tigers from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the first decade of this century, and it is the reason that we have over a million square kilometers of vacant tiger habitat out there. That is to say, we have good habitats but no tigers in them because the tigers and their prey have been poached out of those habitats. Southeast Asia has some of the highest deforestation rates in the world, which means tiger habitat is disappearing very rapidly. But despite that huge threat, poaching is still by far and away the most urgent threat there.

Scott

Well, for someone like you who loves these big cats, this has to be some of the most gratifying work. This is your life mission.

John

It is gratifying because we are making progress. So in 2015, when tigers were assessed by the IUCN, I led the assessment for the IUCN Red List, which then classifies them as critically endangered, vulnerable, and so on. Tigers were classified as endangered in that 2015 assessment and we estimated there were about 3,200 tigers in the wild. In 2022, we again assessed tigers and, again, I led that assessment and we estimated that there were about 4,500 tigers in the wild. Now, that increase may be real or it may be not. It may just be because we've gotten really good at counting tigers and, over the past 10 or 20 years, gotten much better.

As time goes on, we might be better at counting tigers and covering more area, but we are confident that at least range-wide tiger populations haven't declined in the past seven years since 2015 and, indeed, in some areas, we know for sure that they are increasing. Some protected areas in India and some protected areas in Nepal have shown very marked increases in tiger numbers.

Scott

Well, that's good. We appreciate your work.

John

Oh, thank you.

Scott

For people listening to this, is there anything the average listener can do to help you in this mission?

John

Absolutely. The easiest answer is to donate. Panthera needs donations. All the organizations working on tiger conservation or wildcat conservation, in general, need public support and donations to continue. A lot of that money ends up going through range state governments to support their conservation activities. But beyond just donating, engage with policy and the government to support legislation that promotes international conservation, promotes biodiversity conservation, and promotes climate conservation. In our case, for Panthera that promotes cat conservation.

Scott

It's the old phrase, "Think globally, act locally."

John

Absolutely, yes.

Scott

All right. And so the website is Panthera.org. We'll have a link to that in the episode notes. And should people want to contact you, how would they do that? Through the website?

John

Yes, there's a info@panthera.org email address that would end up in my hands eventually, if it was written specifically to me.

Scott

Thanks for sharing your story. I'm glad you had that flare with you.

John

Thank you, Scott. I really enjoyed it.

Scott

In the episode notes, you can see a picture of John with one of his tigers while it was sedated. It's a really beautiful animal – and it's HUGE. And I have links to Panthera if you'd like to get more information. That's all at WhatWasThatLike.com/178.

Got a voice mail about a recent episode – this listener heard episode 175, titled “Mike wears an ostomy pouch” and called in to say this -

Hannah

Hey Scott, my name's Hannah. I'm calling from Indiana. I'm calling in regards to episode 175 about the guy with the ostomy bag. I just wanted to say thank you for the episode. It was a wonderful lesson and I wanted to call and show my support for more episodes like this. There are a lot of health issues and disabilities that I have questions about, but I don't have anyone in my life that I really feel comfortable directly asking. So, I wanted to ask you to please continue to share stories of people with altered bodies. I wanted to say that I do find them as compelling as stories from people who survived traumas or accidents or even have personal triumphs. So yeah, thank you so much for all of your work.

Scott

And guess what – Raw Audio episode 41 has just been released. 41 episodes available to binge now!
In this episode -

A husband shoots some family members in an argument over leaving the lights on –

911 Operator

You shot him?

Male 1

Yes, I shot him and his mother. He's still alive right now, but his mother's not. I don't know. She could be alive. I don't know.

Scott

An animal trainer is attacked by a whale

Female 1

We actually have a trainer in the water with one of our whales - the whale that they're not supposed to be in the water with. So, we don't know what's going on.

Scott

And some teens butt-dial 911 - while burglarizing a car.

Teen

You got to break the SIM card. Take that SIM card out. They can trace it.

Scott

By supporting the show, you get access to ALL 41 of the Raw Audio episodes, and you get every regular episode of the podcast ad-free. On an iPhone, just go to What Was That Like and click on Try Free. On Android, go to WhatWasThatLike.com/PLUS to try it out at no cost.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now we have this week's Listener Story, and it's in keeping with the theme of today's episode. And I didn't even plan that! Do you have a story of something interesting or unusual,

that you can tell in about 5-10 minutes? We all want to hear it! Just record it on your phone and email it to me – Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This one is another story about an encounter with a large animal.

Stay safe, and I'll see you next time.

(Listener Story)

I'm an avid outdoorsman, and I enjoy hiking, fishing, mountain biking, camping, and backpacking. This story takes place on a solo backpack trip in Montana on the 1st of June. Winters around here can feel long when anticipating adventures in the high country. Snow collects and blocks easy access to the back roads that don't get plowed or maintained during the winter months. Camping for me is a year-round occurrence. However, this lack of access to the high country limits my backpack trips in these areas. So, once the snow melts and the roads begin to open, I'm ready to go with many adventurous plans.

This year, my first backpack trip in June was to a high mountain lake near the border between Idaho and Montana. Sunday morning came and I got onto the road early and arrived at the trailhead without a vent. This trip was just myself and my 40-pound rescue dog, Cedar. The hike into the lake was short - around 3 miles. However, nobody had been to this lake since the previous year. Wind-blown trees crossed the trail every 50 feet or so and progress was slow. Over, under, and around these trees was slow going, as was traversing over the top of large snow drifts blocking the trail.

After two hours or so fighting through these obstacles uphill, I finally came to a clearing of the lakeshore and was amazed at the beauty in front of me. The lake sat in a basin with mountains on all sides except for where the stream outlet left the lakeshore and flowed downhill in the direction from where I came. All around me, large snow patches remained and the melting snowpack caused numerous waterfalls to cascade into the lake. These waterfalls were almost on all sides of me and the beauty and sound was mesmerizing. This is what I'd come for - beauty, solace, and personal reflection.

Excited to spend time relaxing in this beautiful arena, I hurried to get chores done first. I set up my tent, rolled my sleeping bag, collected firewood, made and ate lunch, and pumped water to refill my canteens. Now, I was really ready to take in nature's beauty and observe the wonderful landscape until the sun went down behind the mountains. I took my backpack chair down to the lake, along with binoculars and a beer. I had carried that one beer as a personal reward to enjoy after the camp was set up. So, beer cracked and pressed on my lips. I looked out across the lake to the mountains on the far side - so relaxing. How blessed I felt to be at this location.

My eyes followed along the top of the largest waterfall and came to rest on a dark object way up on the mountainside. Setting down my beer, binoculars in hand, I focused and saw a black bear slowly emerging from a cave. It was absolutely beautiful to see this creature on top of what I had already witnessed earlier. As I watched, the bear slowly made his way downhill in my direction toward the tree line and finally disappeared out of sight. "No worry though", I thought. I was carrying both bear spray and a 44 and I felt prepared.

I sat there for another 15 minutes or so until I started to really focus on wondering where the bear had gone. As I pondered what the bear was doing, I started to think about how the bear had likely come out of hibernation very recently, if not when I saw him. My mind started to replay stories I'd heard of people being harassed by skinny hungry bears that had come out of hibernation recently and motivated to regain weight. Although prepared for our worst, a conflict with a bear was the last on my to-do list that day.

Not being able to fully relax and camp, I made a decision. I reluctantly rested on the decision to pack up and car camp at the trailhead. Besides, the other five beers in my six-pack were in my car. So, I shoved my gear back into my backpack and started the descent with Cedar out in front, running back and forth loving life and exploring and smelling everything she could. Progress downhill was slow, and I took careful attention to watch every footfall as they picked through the trees and the snow.

Snowfall was melting and falling onto the trail ahead of me and, as it hit some rocks around a corner from me, the sound muffled any other noises within my immediate vicinity. As I neared this water, my head was down focusing on the trail when I heard a THUD THUD THUD. I looked up in time to see a full-grown bear running directly toward me down the trail at full speed. Each time I hear a THUD! The bear's feet are landing as he's breathing hard and hauling ass directly towards me.

Because of the water noise and my focus on my feet, by the time I had heard the bear and looked up, he was probably 20 feet or so away from me and closing the gap alarmingly fast. There was simply no time to reach for the bear spray on my hip or the 44 in my chest. In fact, he was moving so fast that I didn't even have time to drop the beer I was still holding and grab a defense item. All I had time to do was yell, "HEY!" at the top of my lungs. I guess this yelling startled the bear and he brushed past me downhill, off the trail, and into the bushes as fast as he could go. When he left the trail, he was about five feet from me, still, at an all-out sprint, and I could feel the wind on my face as he careened by. A couple or more bounds, and he was gone, and I just thought to myself, "Well, I guess that just happened."

It happened so fast and was over so quickly. My heart rate did not have time to rise. I stood there, heartbeat steady, hands calm, surprised by what I saw. When my rescue dog came trotting down the trail towards me with that same demeanor of, "Hey, you still coming?" I still wonder how that bear got around my dog. If he was running from Cedar, you would think he would have continued downhill in the opposite direction of my dog. Was the bear after me until my loud yell changed his mind? I guess I will never fully know. But I will say that if you are in bear country, you better see them first because they can close the gap surprisingly quickly, considering how big they are.

Take care.