

## NO RISKS BEFORE BREAKFAST

"During my career as a wildlife filmmaker, I've lived through some pretty scary moments," admits **Marty Stouffer**, host of the popular PBS series *WILD AMERICA*. "But if you grow up hunting and photographing wild animals, as I did, you develop a sixth sense for what they might do." Surprisingly, Stouffer says that elemental factors such as weather and terrain can be more treacherous and unpredictable than a mother grizzly bear with cubs. "On several occasions, I've come close to paying with my life for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Filming bighorn sheep in Montana led to two life-threatening situations. While strapped into a pack loaded with all his camera gear, Stouffer was caught in a heavy spring avalanche. "I couldn't free myself from the equipment, so I tried making swimming motions to stay on top of the churning snow," he relates. "As the whole mess settled to a halt, I found myself upright and buried up to my chest. It took the rest of the afternoon to dig myself out, but I was as happy as a kid buried in ice cream."

Later, while following a bighorn ewe, Stouffer found himself trapped on a narrow, icy ledge where a fall of a thousand feet seemed inevitable. "I flattened my palms against the cliff and froze while I waited several tense hours for the sun to melt enough ice so I could crawl to safety on bare rock." The final irony of that experience, he adds, was that the film he shot that day, hoping it would reveal the life and death cycle among bighorns, came back blank from the lab. "That's the real risk of a filmmaker," he says modestly.

One of the *WILD AMERICA* programs most popular with Stouffer's audiences is "The Man Who Loved Bears," a true-life story about raising an orphaned female grizzly cub and teaching her the skills she would need to survive when released in the wild. Grizzlies being among the most ferocious and fickle of wild animals, weren't there any moments of danger with 'Griz?' "Well, she got mad at me one fall when I tried to get her to hibernate before she was ready for bed," he says. "And when she grew older, our games of tag got a little rough. But no, she never turned on me -- though other grizzlies did."

Stouffer relates that while filming Alaskan brown bears -- a type of grizzly found along Alaska's McNeil River -- he intruded on an ill-tempered sow bear as she fished for salmon. As the bear eyed him with flattened ears, he reached for the pistol he was wearing, bandolier-style, in a holster slung over his shoulder. "She charged, and I slowly stepped backward while I wrestled with the pistol and holster tangled in the straps of my backpack. When I finally stopped, she stopped, too. Bears often charge for bluff, or to get a better look at what they're charging at. She sure got an eyeful of me."

As producer of the *WILD AMERICA* series, one of his concerns is to educate the public about wild animals -- "how not to hurt them, and how not to get hurt by them." He compares himself to a rodeo clown who draws attention to himself "to show people that wild animals can be dangerous, and when and why they're most likely to be so." Males of some species, for instance, are more aggressive in the fall when they're fighting for mating privileges, while females are more dangerous in spring and summer when they have young to protect.

"I sense how they must feel, now that I have young of my own to protect," Stouffer says, referring to his daughter Hannah and son Luke. Because of the children, he concludes, he takes fewer chances in the wild than he used to. "These days, I never take major risks before breakfast," he jokes, adding that he doesn't consider his job any more dangerous than the next person's -- "especially those folks who brave freeway traffic to get to work in the morning."

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