

Venomous Animals of the World

Steve Backshall

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Anyone fearful of death by bite, sting, or simple contact with nature in the wild should prepare to be a great deal more fearful. Biologist Steve Backshall introduces us to venomous creatures great and small, familiar or little known, common or rare, in magnificent photographs in glowing color and distinctive detail. Backshall presents his charming friends by species and per continent—it's a relief to learn that North America has the fewest venomous species. Properly dressed and armed against stingrays and the Gila monster, most American can risk stepping outside...though a bark scorpion may be lurking on the trunk upon which a southerner places an unsuspecting hand.

The book is genuinely disturbing in that most of us do not know (and therefore would not recognize) venomous wildlife. The average American has never met a bearded newt nor the average Briton a weeverfish—but any meeting could leave painful memories. Asia, with its dangerously attractive, squirrel-like slow loris, and Australasia, with the splendid hooded pitohui bird, win the glamour prizes.

Backshall provides useful sections on the effects of various venoms, lethal dose levels, and mortality statistics (surprisingly low), plus the medicinal value of certain venoms. Wear shoes in tropical waters, don't poke spiders, and stay away from snakes still hold true.

PETER SKINNER (January 9, 2009)

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