

Wildlife filmmaker's scariest moments

Scottish wildlife filmmaker, Gordon Buchanan, has come face to face with hungry polar bears, been chased by elephants and stalked by lions – but he said his most dangerous and heart-stopping moments have all been caused by humans.

Buchanan, 52, has spent his life exploring the natural world and hunting for footage of elusive creatures. But according to the photographer his scariest moments were always caused by humans making bad decisions.

He told the [National Trust for Scotland's Love Scotland podcast](#): "I've been doing this since I was 17 so I have been hanging out with what people view as big scary animals for all of my adult life.

"Invariably there are times when you are in close proximity to a potentially dangerous animal but I don't like to describe any animal as dangerous, it's our behaviour around them that leads to things going wrong or someone getting hurt.

"A polar bear is just a polar bear doing what it does – it's people making the wrong decisions that turn it into a dangerous animal."

He added: "Last year I was in a car in Botswana, the driver

was drunk and was driving like a maniac. I'd been hanging out with lions for months and months and in this vehicle with no doors on I was like 'this is the most dangerous thing I've done this year'.

"But when I look back, all of those things involving animals that were dangerous – the things that I'd done were dangerous – I was young and not thinking ahead.

"I was sleeping out in hides where there were elephants... rambling about through the forests and being surprised when I bump into a wild elephant and when it chases me.

"I'd never do that now or if I did I would just be hypervigilant and have somebody with me rather than just wandering off and thinking 'oh everything will be fine'.

"I'm just better at recognising the things that will get me into trouble, and touch wood, what people perceive as a dangerous situation, it's just that for them they would be scared but for me it's not a scary situation."

Buchanan famously came face to face with an 80 stone female polar bear that tried to make a snack of him as he filmed the animals in Svalbard in the Arctic Circle.

Buchanan, who was filming from inside a metal cube for a BBC series called The Polar Bear Family And Me, when the enormous animal attacked, insists he would not put himself in the same position now.

He said: "There was a desire to have this sense of proximity to polar bears. We filmed black bears in Minnesota the year before and these were bears that you could literally sit beside.

"The next series was polar bears in the Arctic and we said we can't have that same proximity because polar bears, we're on their menu as a light snack.

“So we had this idea, what about getting a transparent hide that I could be safe in so we wouldn’t have to run away from the polar bears?”

“So with this reinforced, hopefully polar bear-proof, hide you could get this idea I’m out there on my own with the polar bears on the ice.

“We really didn’t expect any of the bears to show as much interest as this one particular one did.”

Buchanan told National Trust for Scotland president Jackie Bird: “I wouldn’t do that again... Inwardly I was terrified because it wasn’t safe, there were certain things that could have gone wrong that we hadn’t anticipated until I was in that situation.

“If it was now, at the age of 52, I would realise what the real danger could be and put a stop to it. I’d radio the rest of the team, who were about 150 metres away, and they would come and get me out.

“It was terrifying but there’s a sort of distraction technique. If you outwardly appear calm, if you talk calmly and try and communicate.

“I thought, I’ll just do my job which is to try and communicate this experience and that I found sort of settled me down, it turned me away from the actual terror of it.

“There’s something a bit like, it’s unlikely that a TV presenter that’s nice and calm and presenting this experience is going to get eaten.

“They’re filming it on a long lens, I had three or four cameras inside, it’s unlikely something’s going to go wrong because generally someone’s demise isn’t captured so comprehensively.”

Personal struggles

Buchanan also discussed his battle with depression, and insisted he would trade his life for one without the “black dog”.

He told National Trust for Scotland president, Jackie Bird: “If I could choose to live a life black dog free or without any of this career I would go for a life of not feeling this way.

“Because you’re striving for perfection, you want to excel so you’re kind of always looking over your shoulder at a shadow, not at anyone else, and I think that’s what has driven me.

“But I have such a great life in so many ways, an amazing family, I’ve so much fun in life and the majority of the time I don’t feel that way.

“And I’ve got a lot better at recognising it and trying to fend it off, but when you’re unable to get out of bed, all you want to do is just sleep and kind of not exist, it’s such a horrible place...

“... It’s like in Harry Potter, when the Dementors suck all the joy out of the life, these kinds of demonic creatures, that’s kind of what it’s like.

“But it has been the sort of storm that has kind of pushed me along my journey.”

He added: “People love nature, it’s kind of within us. We realise that there is this disconnect and disharmony.

“And as much as we have more things than we ever had, we have a better life generally than we ever have had, houses are full of more stuff, but people’s discontent and mental health problems continue to rise and, for me at least, the natural world has always been a distraction, a place sort of that you

can celebrate, a place that you can sort of try and make more sense of the world and your place within it.”

