

Outdoors

Weird wildlife I — the Pangolin

Among the most interesting things about hunting in foreign lands are some of the really outlandish animals one meets. These are not necessarily game animals that a hunter is there to shoot, although some do fit that description.

Many are either extremely rare or, at least, rarely seen. They are nocturnal, secretive, subterranean – or all of the above. For example, although I've spent many weeks, total, in the African bush, I've never seen an aardvark, a relatively common animal that lives in deep burrows and emerges only after dark. Another very shy animal that has escaped my eyes is the aardwolf, a shaggy, fox-sized, termite-eating relative of the common, much larger (to 175 pounds) and more aggressive spotted hyena.

Once I was lucky enough in the Kalahari Desert to get a brief but exciting view of a rare black-footed cat, Africa's smallest feline, smaller than the average house cat. Such glimpses are one of the seldom-mentioned rewards of safari, and for me are every bit as memorable as many of the wonderful African big-game animals it has been my privilege to stalk.

But my all-time favorite weird sighting in Africa was a pangolin.

"A what?" you say.

A pangolin is a mammal that looks like a reptile. It looks even more like a giant, animated artichoke. Some call him a scaly anteater or "a kind of armadillo." He does

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eat ants and has scales (oh boy; does he ever!), but he bears no resemblance whatever to the South American anteaters, or, for that matter, to anything else alive. One glance at the photo will expose the absurdity of the armadillo comparison, although his standard defense against predators – including lions – is to roll up in a ball, about the size and weight of a bowling ball, like our familiar Kerr County flowerbed-wrecker.

A pangolin's almost-impenetrable scales protect every inch of his back, tail, head, sides, and the outsides of his legs, and his spherical defensive posture takes care of his soft underbelly. At a glance he seems to have no eyes or ears, and he hasn't a tooth in his mouth (who wants to chew ants?)

He is, however, not without weapons; those jagged, horny, knife-like scales are powered by special muscles, and trying to pick up a live pangolin is about like grabbing a running electric knife by the blade! You might lose a finger that way.

There's more. Prowling pangolins normally sort of

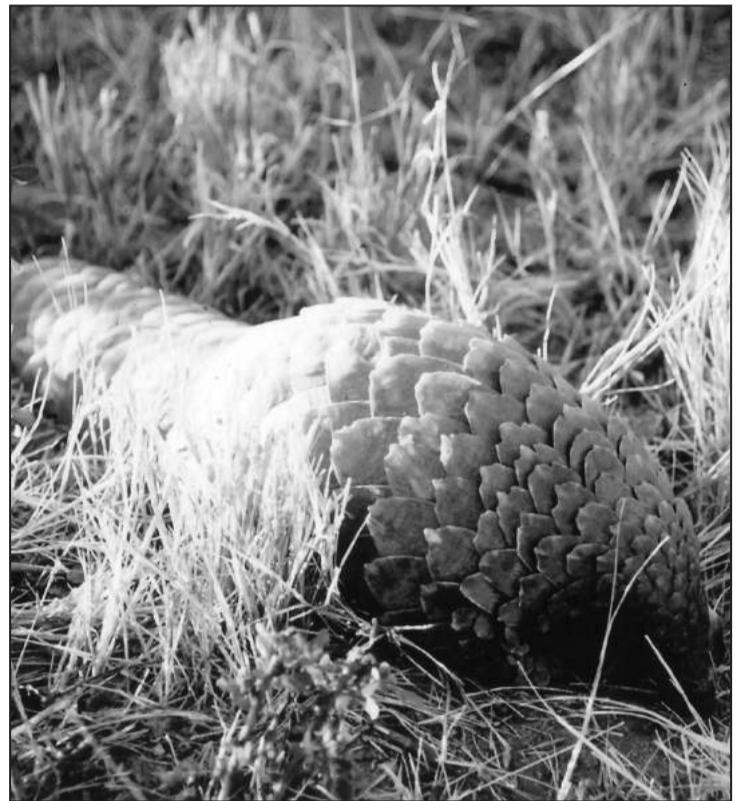


Photo by John Wootters

The African pangolin, one of the strangest animals in the world, looks like a giant, animated artichoke. Despite reptilian appearance, it's a mammal. It's very strong and solidly-built, slow moving, but carries a concealed weapon. This Cape pangolin is about 3-1/2 feet long and weighs perhaps 20 pounds, but it fears few predators.

potter along on all fours, walking on the outsides of their forefeet to protect the great curved claws with which they rip their way into termite mounds and anthills, but if frightened they can tuck up their forefeet and run on just the hind legs, not upright but with the body held parallel to the ground and balanced by the long, heavy tail after the manner of many bipedal dinosaurs. The first of the two pangolins I've seen in the wild was motoring along in just that fashion at dusk in the Kalahari Desert, and he did have a distinctly prehistoric look about him.

Lionel Palmer, my professional hunter on that occasion, was a keen student of wildlife who was born in Africa and had spent most of his life in the bush, yet he had never seen a live, free pangolin until then. Twelve years later, on another Botswana safari, I had the almost unbelievable luck to come across a second pangolin (pictured here), this one in broad daylight when they

aren't habitually out and about.

The natives of West Africa hold pangolins in awe, attributing supernatural powers both to the animal and his scales. In southern Africa, where both of my sightings occurred, pangolins are illegally killed, for their meat and maybe for a little witch-doctor "juju," and of the four African and three Asian species, the Cape pangolin is most seriously endangered.

By my orders, both of those I have encountered were allowed to go about their mysterious business unharmed.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.