

Dragon's Dinner Manqué

My girlfriend, the skipper's wife and myself were standing atop a steep-sided limestone islet poking up just off a beach on Horseshoe Bay, Rinca Island, Komodo National Park. And more company was on its way. A hundred metres down the beach the way we had come, I noticed, a 2.5m dragon was following hot upon the flick-flick-flick of its tongue, moving toward us as though it were very late for lunch indeed.

A Komodo dragon lizard scents with its forked tongue, its head weaving from side to side at the end of a long serpentine neck. In this case, it had probably scented my dive booties, so ripe I might as well have strapped long-dead goats to my ankles. The scaly great beast sashayed along on its stubby appendages much like a deadset gourmand chasing a whiff of finest pâté de foie gras.

If you're going to stroll around an uninhabited island with wild dragon lizards — animals that evolved as the main predator of a now-extinct species of pygmy elephant and which now feed on wild ponies, pigs and, frequently, each other — you do not leave yourself marooned atop little islands off the beach. Komodo dragons can swim, and they can climb. And they aren't famous for discriminating between pigs and people in situations such as this one.

Neither do you leave yourself marooned there or, for that matter, anywhere else in the area, without a dragon stick. On this occasion, our dragon sticks were parked at the base of the little limestone tower. The climb had looked too difficult for us to bring them along. But there wasn't a lot of time for reflection on these oversights, given the rate at which our friend was approaching. So we clambered down to collect our weapons. The ladies headed out across a broad patch of sand, keeping scrub forest between themselves and our visitor. Meanwhile I advanced back down the beach to meet the dragon, feeling uncertainly heroic, bamboo quarterstave at the ready.

Some will say that reptiles are by nature impassive. Inscrutable, even. Nevertheless, this one's face bloomed with patent joy as it caught sight of me standing

there in my dive booties. The dragon was considerably longer than I was, but not as tall. So I did my best to stand even taller. It nevertheless continued to accelerate towards me.

Aside from having a number of big teeth, dragons have powerful tails with which they can sweep a victim's legs out from under him. With all of this information in mind, and trying at the same time to look as though I were in control of the situation, I leapt up on a rock, wishing it were instead an express elevator. Unimpressed with my height, which was still less than that of a pygmy elephant, the animal started to climb right up after me. Unwilling, for my part, to serve as lunch, and unable to think of a more humane alternative, I jabbed it in the head with my stick.

And that was it. The dragon folded its cards. It took but a moment to reconsider matters before dropping back down to the sand and scuttling into some bushes in the shade of a big rock a few metres away. I watched it disappear and then stood there for a couple of minutes, wondering whether this was some kind of trick.

Eventually, however, I descended from my perch. I moved cautiously to where I had seen the dragon disappear and I peered into the shadows. There it lay, motionless. The one eye I could see gazed back unblinkingly. The creature's whole manner was eloquent: "Dragon lizard? What dragon lizard? I am a dead log. So bugger off." And this was something I decided I would do.

By now the ladies had rejoined me. Yeah, I said. No problem. Everything was fine, and I hadn't been eaten or anything. Then I recalled some of the things I had read about dragon lizards. For example, the fact that their specially adapted teeth were infested with maybe 50 different sorts of bacteria, several of them septic, so they only had to scratch their prey to poison it and then follow as it weakened. Dragons, furthermore, can scent infected and decaying animals from kilometres away, and, even if the original hunter loses track of its prey, others will quickly home in on it from all points of the compass. I remembered this, and I suddenly remembered my booties, which even then might have been attracting interest from as far away as neighbouring islands.

I suggested it was time to paddle our kayaks back to the boat and join the others for a nice drink before dinner, where we could resume an earlier discussion, with me

ready to resolve once and for all the issue of whether a Komodo dragon lizard would attack a full-grown human being.

And maybe I would rinse out my dive booties. **By Collin Piprell**