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Dog Pack Attack: Hunting Humans

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Abstract

Dog bite-related fatalities, although unusual, accounted for 304 deaths in the United States between 1979 and 1996 and 6 fatalities in Canada between 1994 and 1996. Fatal dog pack attacks and attacks involving human predation are less common. The following describes a dog pack attack on a family of four involving 2 fatalities with predation of the victims. Factors previously identified that contribute to pack attacks and predation, including prior group hunting, social feeding, territorial defense, lack of human interaction, and prey stimuli, are discussed.

Dog bite-related fatalities accounted for 304 deaths in the United States between 1979 and 1996 (1) and 6 deaths in Canada between 1994 and 1996 (2), with most fatalities occurring in young children (1,2). Although fatalities from dog bites are uncommon, dog pack attacks are even less common, accounting for 6.9% of all fatal dog attacks between 1989 and 1994 (3). Dog pack attacks with human predation appear to be extremely rare (4). The following case report demonstrates such an event in which a pack of dogs stalked, killed, and consumed their human prey.

CASE REPORT

On a summer day in August a family of four individuals, including a husband aged 49 years, wife aged 44 years, and 2 male children aged 10 and 8 years, ventured to a nearby island to pick berries. The island was inhabited by a team of 8 Labrador Huskies used as sled dogs that had been placed there for the summer to roam free. While picking berries, the father and two children became separated from the wife, who had decided to pick berries in a nearby section of the island. The husband became alerted to a problem when he heard his wife screaming and, with the two children, ran to her assistance. Upon arriving at the scene, the husband saw that a number of dogs had surrounded his wife, had her pinned to the ground, and were biting her in the head and neck area. The husband and children started to throw rocks at the dogs in an attempt to get the

dogs off the woman's body. Their efforts were successful; however, the dogs remained in the area. Upon approaching the body it became apparent that the victim was dead.

The husband and children were unable to remove the body to a secure area. The eldest child ran back to the boat to get matches to build a fire in an attempt to keep the dogs away from the body while they went for help. When he did so, the dogs left the area and circled around the shoreline, where they attacked and killed the child. By the time the father and surviving child arrived at the boat, the dogs had begun feeding on the body. The survivors once again threw rocks at the dogs, which this time attacked them. Both had to run into the water to escape. They were eventually able to enter their boat and seek help. When a rescue team arrived on the island, the dogs were feeding on the female body. All of the dogs were destroyed, and 4 were sent for autopsy and rabies testing. The bodies of the 2 victims were transported to the medical examiner's office for examination. Autopsies were performed on both victims.

Examination of the woman revealed a normally developed, healthy, 44-year-old with extensive soft tissue loss to the lower face, neck, and thorax, as well as extensive tissue loss to the right thigh and left upper arm (Fig. 1). The right upper limb was absent. The chest cavity had been exposed and all viscera were absent (Fig. 2). Numerous bite marks consistent with a canis were present on the body.

FIG. 1. Extensive soft tissue loss and bite marks.
FIG. 2. Chest cavity exposed with absent viscera.

Examination of the other victim revealed an otherwise healthy 10-year-old boy with extensive soft tissue loss to the head, neck, thorax, and left upper limb, which had been amputated at the scapula. Body cavities were intact. Numerous bite marks were present over the entire body (Fig. 3).

FIG. 3. Soft tissue loss to head, neck, and thorax.

Autopsies performed on the 4 dogs (3 male, 1 female) revealed that they were in good health and had a good layer of subcutaneous adipose tissue; the female dog was pregnant with 7 pups. All 4 dogs had identifiable human remains in their stomach; in addition, 1 dog had seagull remains present. Testing for rabies was negative.

DISCUSSION

All dogs are social animals that have a natural pack instinct; in the case of domestic dogs, the pack is most often the human family unit (5). In addition to pack instinct, dogs display territorial behavior and exhibit social dominance as important elements of pack survival. When hunting as a pack, dogs immobilize

their prey by biting the hindquarters; this is followed by bites to the head, neck, and thorax (6). Death is most often due to exsanguination (7).

Factors that contribute to pack hunting in domestic dogs have been described (4) and include prior group predation and social feeding, defense of territory, lack of social interaction with humans, and environmental (prey) stimuli (especially movement). Although the majority of dogs involved in predation attacks showed no evidence of starvation, most were reported as underweight (4). In the present case, it is apparent that the dogs were adequately nourished and were allegedly fed the day before by their owner, thus supporting the claim that starvation is not a factor in predation attacks. The size and breed of dogs involved in pack attacks vary from small cross-breeds weighing

The majority of victims of dog pack attack are young children or elderly women (5); incidences of predation include attacks on healthy adolescents males (4). Multiple victims of an attack, as in the present case, appear unique.

When considering the circumstances surrounding the deaths in this case with respect to the factors that contribute to pack behavior, such an event was almost predictable. Placing sled dogs on an uninhabited island (which is a common practice in the area) facilitates group hunting and feeding, reduces interaction with humans, and undoubtedly promotes territorialism in a group of dogs already functioning as a social unit. Once attacked, victim movement and other provoking stimuli are almost inevitable. With dog sledding increasing in popularity, the wisdom of placing such animals on uninhabited islands should be reviewed.

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