

Hiker Recounts Horrifying Experience of Being Attacked by a Cow to the EBRPD Board of Directors

Dear Members of the Board:

I was attacked by a cow at Sunol Regional Park on Sunday, Aug. 22, 2004. During my unexpected days off of work (due to injuries sustained in the attack) I've been doing a bit of research on cow attacks.

After a fair amount of digging, I realized that what I initially considered to be a "freak accident" is actually a completely preventable and not-so-rare occurrence. I have frequented various East Bay Regional Parks in the 7 years I have lived in the Bay Area and naturally assumed that since the cows were there, grazing near the hiking trails, they must be perfectly safe. How wrong was I? I was completely unaware that I was putting myself in danger of experiencing a cow encounter like Sunday's. Why are there no signs posted warning of the dangers of the cows like there are of the mountain lions and rattlesnakes? From what I've seen, and please correct me if I'm wrong, it looks like there have been more injuries sustained by our so-called "peaceful, benevolent" cow-friends than from either mountain lions or rattlesnakes (combined?). Why is it that the cow attacks don't get the same media coverage as a mountain lion sighting?

I filed a report Sunday night at Sunol but I will review my incident with you to save you the trouble.

I was hiking down Hayfield Road at about 6:30pm when I encountered a cow with a calf at a fairly narrow portion of the trail. Ordinarily the cows run away as a hiker approaches but I knew this circumstance was a bit different since there was a calf involved. I slowed down and came to a stop before approaching the cow. There wasn't an alternative route to take, since there was barbed wire on the left hand side of the trail and vegetation on the right side. In hindsight, I should have just gone back up the path and taken an alternative trail down but who is to say that the same problem wouldn't present itself there? I slowly tried to get by the cow and calf, giving as much distance as possible. I didn't get very far before the cow charged at me, head down, and flung me into the air.

I landed hard on my tailbone and scrambled to get back on my feet, knowing that on the ground in front of the cow would leave me in a very vulnerable (even life threatening) position. In my haste to stand back up, I grabbed onto the only stable object within my reach - the barbed wire fence. I screamed for help while I saw the cow retreat and then begin to make motions of another charge. I honestly don't remember whether the cow charged a second time or not. I do know that during this time, I had the clear and distinct thought that I was about to die. This was a bit more than I had contemplated on a peaceful hike through Sunol. At this time a stray dog that had been following me throughout my hike came to my defense, barking at the cow and causing it to retreat a few feet away. I took this opportunity to jump up and on the other side of the barbed wire fence.

Terrified of encountering the cow again, I was forced to hike off-trail back down to the parking lot. After filing a report with the park ranger and police, and being treated medically by the fire department, I spent 4 hours at Kaiser. I sustained injuries to my tailbone and ribs and received various lacerations from the barbed wire (requiring 6 stitches) but consider myself lucky for getting out of Sunol alive.

I know this is a long winded description of my activities on Sunday but I want to drive home the point that one realizes and acknowledges the dangers in getting in a car, on an airplane or even crossing the street carelessly. When I go hiking, I assume that as long as I don't fall or encounter a mountain lion, rattlesnake or serial killer, I'm safe. It was assumed by myself, and is probably assumed by all who spend leisure time at the East Bay Regional Parks, that safety is not endangered on a hiking trail. I was never opposed to sharing my hiking space with the grazing cattle but, obviously, this incident has changed my view on this issue. If cows are to remain at the East Bay Regional Parks, something needs to change. Is it possible to contain the cattle in an enclosed area, warning hikers who are entering this area that they are doing so at their own risk? Can warning signs be posted amongst the mountain lion and rattlesnake warnings? In my research into this topic, I pulled up a number of incidents in which hikers were seriously injured by aggressive cows. Obviously, it's only a matter of time before someone loses their life at one of the East Bay Regional Parks. I am going to do all I can on my end to prevent my ordeal from happening to someone else. I hope you will do likewise.

Sincerely,
-Jennie Barber