



### D44 Animal Attack-Related Deaths in Florida

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an appreciation of the nature of the varied types of deaths resulting from the interactions between humans and indigenous and exotic animals and reptiles in Florida, and the species involved.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a unique insight into Florida's varied fatal human/animal encounters and by illustrating the importance of the multidisciplinary medicolegal death investigation in these cases.

Florida has been the setting of several high profile deaths caused by captive animals in its amusement parks; the most recent being the death of a trainer killed by an orca whale, as well as two previously reported deaths caused by elephants. Nationally Florida also has the third highest rate of deaths due to attacks by canines, the most common offending species being the pit bull. Additionally, the state has also been the location of a number of deaths caused by indigenous species, as well non-native mammals and reptiles, which are frequently kept as pets in the state. Florida's unique climate provides an environment suitable for many potentially hazardous native and exotic species, including reptiles. This has resulted in a multitude of unforeseen fatal encounters between these animals and the ever expanding human population.

Files from the District 21 Medical Examiner's Office, which serves three counties in southwest Florida, and the District 5 MEO, encompassing five counties located in the central part of the state, in addition to previously tabulated records of deaths resulting from animal attacks/encounters, to elucidate the types of deaths and the species involved were reviewed. The most frequently reported deaths have resulted from shark attacks (25) on swimmers visiting Florida's many beaches and alligator attacks (18), most commonly attributed to alligators that have lost their innate fear of humans because they have been fed by individuals who have ignored the widespread warnings against such feeding. In addition to deaths caused by horses and dogs, Florida jurisdictions have seen five alligator-related deaths and one death caused by the mauling by a Siberian tiger kept in a private sanctuary. In addition, two deaths caused by snakes, including the first death due to the envenomization of a coral snake reported since anti-venom was developed 40 years ago, and in spite of the fact that non-lethal coral snake bites are frequent in Florida. The other snake-related death was that of a 2-year-old child who was the victim of mechanical asphyxiation by an improperly housed albino Burmese python that was kept as a pet. In spite of Florida's large bear population, there has never been a reported death in the state caused a bear. The immediate causes of death in these cases varied nearly as much as the species involved, and included exsanguination, drowning, sepsis, asphyxia, and blunt force trauma. The determination of the cause and manner of deaths in these cases requires a multidisciplinary investigation and necessitates the cooperation of the investigating law enforcement and wildlife conservation agencies, the medicolegal death investigator and the forensic pathologist. Whether foreseen or unforeseen, the underlying cause of death is always a result of the human/animal interaction.

While the literature and knowledge pool for more routine deaths (motor vehicle collisions, gunshot wounds and overdoses) is abundant, that of animal-related deaths is far less widespread. The deaths reported in this presentation provide a unique insight into Florida's varied fatal animal encounters.

#### **Animal Attack, Death, Florida**