

The Dangers of the Selfie, Courier Editorial Staff, Sept. 20, 2015

All too frequently, common sense takes a holiday with a cellphone in hand. According to the National Safety Council, an estimated 1.6 million accidents occur annually as distracted drivers text. The University of North Texas Health Science Center has determined 16,141 deaths occurred as a result of texting while driving.

Those are frightening statistics for anyone on the road who could become the victim of such wanton negligence. But the dangers in the digital divide don't stop there. In this Age of Internet Narcissism, dozens of deaths annually have been attributed to selfies — self-portraits using cellphones often taken in unusual circumstances.

A North Carolina driver was killed when she crashed into a truck while posting a selfie of herself singing Pharrell Williams' "Happy." A pilot in Colorado lost control of his Cessna 150, killing himself and his passenger. A Puerto Rican musician died while taking a selfie on a motorcycle. A Polish couple crossed a safety barrier and fell off a cliff in Portugal while taking a selfie as their children watched.

Several instances of "death by selfie" occurred while the photographer inadvertently pulled the trigger of a loaded gun in the other hand. Selfie sticks also figure in the carnage. One person was killed when he was struck by lightning. Another died after climbing atop a train when his selfie stick touched a high-voltage wire.

Russia announced a public campaign against selfies in dangerous situations after ten reported deaths and 100 injuries this year. An official stated, "We would like to remind the citizens that the chase for 'likes' in social networks can lead to the road of death."

In Denver, officials closed a public park in late August after incidents involving individuals taking selfies with bears. That echoed an action at Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada, where a "bear bulletin" was issued to dissuade tourists from taking selfies with the animals alongside the road.

Earlier in the summer, rangers in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming felt compelled to distribute pamphlets with an image of a man being gored and flung into the air by a bison. The animals, they noted, are "wild, unpredictable, and dangerous." They also weigh 3,500 pounds and have been clocked at 30 mph.

Three aborted Yellowstone selfies with bison could have added a new meaning to "photobomb." A 43-year-old Mississippi woman and her daughter were within 6 yards of a bison for their photo op when nature reared its ugly head. According to a park service statement, "They heard the bison's footsteps moving toward them and started to run, but the bison caught the mother on the right side, lifted her up and tossed her with its head." She suffered only minor injuries. Other selfie-related incidents involved a 16-year old Taiwanese girl and a 62-year-old Australian man being gored by bison.

In San Diego — in an extraordinarily stupid and expensive instance of a selfie — a man picked up a rattlesnake from the brush for his photo documentation. The snake gashed his arm. It took the anti-venom stock at two hospitals to save him. The bill was \$153,161.25, including \$83,341.25 for pharmacy costs.

While squirrels on the Wartburg College campus are legendary for their friendliness, a selfie with the rodents can pose a risk. A Maine teenager in Florida to check out a college campus saw a squirrel sitting on a handrail in a park and took a selfie. The flash from the cellphone scared the squirrel, which climbed under his shirt and hung onto his back.

“I threw myself on the ground, and that scared him off,” said Brian Genest, whose mother captured the incident on Instagram. An estimated one million selfies are taken daily. Time Magazine has even ranked the Top Selfie Spots in the world — Makati City and Pasig, the Philippines at No. 1, followed by Manhattan, Miami and Orange County, Calif.

Obviously, the vast majority of selfies aren’t hazardous to health — until the obsession becomes too adventurous. While the list of selfie-related accidents may seem stranger than fiction, the tragedy is that basic precautions to maintain life and limb were ignored in pursuit of a photo.