

## Beware the Groundhog!

Dogs that go into a hole in the ground in search of the inhabitants face many hazards. The tunnel may cave in or collapse, crushing him or cutting off his source of air. Earth working dogs everywhere face these same hazards. However, only in America is a dog likely to face a groundhog. The groundhog just might be the most dangerous opponent the dog ever encounters in the ground. Above ground he's no sissy but most terrier dogs can get the better of a groundhog if they catch it in the open. It's in his lair that the groundhog can become a totally different kind of *beast*. Many good terriers that tangled with groundhogs have been found dead in the ground when their handlers got to him. Rarely, if ever, does a Patterdale, (or other earth working terrier) expire during combat with any other type of *beast* of the subterranean haunts. The dog might expire from any of a variety of hazards but generally not from fighting *the beast*. It's all dangerous work to be sure. However, *the beast* is rarely able to give the dog fatal wounds in the face to face fights that occur in the ground. Only the groundhog brings a credible mortal threat to the dog. Even dogs that are not very prone to actual combat might meet their mortal end in just one brief encounter with a groundhog. Why are these creatures so dangerous? The answer is simple and complex at the same time.

It's because of the Groundhogs teeth. Groundhogs have teeth that are designed for cutting wood. Their teeth are shaped like chisels and they're quite sharp at all times. It's the shape and design of these teeth that make the groundhog such a threat to any animal that has the temerity to invade his lair. Animals that routinely kill and eat groundhogs when found in the open quickly learn that getting one out of the ground is a hazardous undertaking that's best left to... *others*. The way to understand all this is to study the nature of the kind of wounds those teeth make as compared to the wounds made by the teeth of other creatures. This is a study of "Bite Mechanics 101."

First, lets look at the creatures we commonly think of as being dangerous in close quarters. Listed in order of their perceived level of threat to the intruder, (in America,) the top of the list, 1<sup>st</sup> is the Badger, 2<sup>nd</sup> is the Raccoon and 3<sup>rd</sup> is the Fox. I like to call them "the Big 3." Below them are a variety of creatures that don't really count when considered against this trio. These *beasts* are no joke and dogs that like to get physical with them quickly develop a frightening appearance from having their faces chewed upon. This is only a common event with dogs that are said to be "hard." The big 3 all have the same kind of teeth. They have the teeth of meat eaters. Their teeth are pointed and they make puncture type wounds. Puncture wounds are quite painful but the teeth that make them don't generally cut anything. Canine teeth are primarily for gripping. The wound is made bigger and more painful by tugging and shaking once a firm hold is established. They sometimes tear the flesh or break a blood vessel by vigorous

shaking or “working” the wound. What's more, puncture wounds tend to bleed slowly and often stop bleeding on their own if given a break from the action. Veins and arteries are more likely to be pushed aside than actually broken open. While ugly and certainly painful, puncture wounds are seldom fatal. Such are the wound mechanics of canine teeth.

The animals with the chisel type teeth are a completely different lot. Their teeth cut deeply into the flesh with relative ease. The wounds made by these teeth bleed profusely. Any doctor will tell you that a clean cut bleeds more readily than a puncture wound. Any doctor will also tell you that a “clean cut” is notably less painful than a puncture wound. Many working men will say the same thing. I'm sure any carpenter knows what I'm talking about. It gets worse. Such teeth cut so easily through skin and flesh that there isn't anything to stop the teeth until they hit bone. Ouch!

There is also the fact that all animals great and small have veins and arteries that run along either side of their muzzle or nose. This happens to be where the bulk of the fighting action takes place when two animals are fighting in the ground. So, a dog that is fighting with a groundhog is getting cut by teeth that cleanly sever anything in their path until they hit something solid, like bone. Any veins or arteries in the path of the bite get cut too. The dog faces a real mortal hazard if an artery gets cut. His life is measure in minutes as he loses blood until he passes out and stops fighting. The groundhog usually runs off and the dog is simply found dead or near death when the men finally dig to his location. (If the dog isn't wearing a tracking collar of some type he may never be found.) While not really a common event, a dog that was fighting a groundhog being found dead in the ground occurs often enough to encourage the men to dig vigorously in order to get to the scene before something bad happens. Many times the men don't realize what has happened. The blood can soak into the ground leaving very little evidence of what happened. There's often no “pool of blood” to tell the story. The wounds will not look any worse than any other wound the dog may have received. Some seasoned earth workers will be learning of this for the first time as they read this.

There is no argument being made about the ferocity of the badger, raccoon or the fox. However, every one of those animals would rather retreat than actually fight in a tunnel. Some groundhogs seem to be quite confident once in the ground and will occasionally come to the dog to do battle. Groundhogs fight each other with these same teeth. To them these kind of wounds are a normal part of fighting. By way of comparison it is plainly true that carnivores customarily go to some effort to avoid getting hurt. Life is already hard for wild animals. It gets much harder with any kind of injury. Carnivores must deal with some amount of risk just to get by. They don't go around looking for hard battles to fight. That behavior tends to shorten one's life.

This subject seems to separate the terrier men into two groups with distinctly differing viewpoints. I call these groups the “barkers” and the “biters.” That is, one group prefers their dogs to bay *the beast* loudly and “mark” the location so the men know where to dig. These dogs will nip at the creature but generally won’t get involved in a full-on battle with it. This crowd claims to have the dog’s health and longevity first in mind. They have a good argument in the fact that the men usually have to dig to the dog anyway. They say there’s no need for all that work only to have to rush off to a vet and have the dog out of service for weeks. It’s a very good argument. This sentiment happens to include the bulk of the “show dog” crowd too.

The other group prefers the dog to boldly attack *the beast*, barking only when he cannot get his teeth into the animal. These dogs invariably develop facial disfigurements from all the mauling they get. After only a few encounters some of these dogs are positively frightening to look at. They don’t seem to care one bit about it and are usually eager to go into another hole in search of yet another *beast*. To be fair, it is from this group that we occasionally hear of a dog “drawing” *the beast*. That is, they physically drag *the beast* out of the ground, sometimes killing it in the process. A dog that accomplishes such a feat has a proud owner to be sure. True, it’s a rare event, but it does happen. And when it does, it’s normally a dog of the “biter” class that got it done.

Additionally, it should come as no surprise that the “white collar” crowd seems to prefer the barkers and that the biters are the darlings of the “blue collar” crowd. These differences have existed ever since these classes came into existence. There are also plenty of folks who cross the class lines because they agree with one or the other group regardless of their place in society. No matter which class the owners are from, the two classes of earth-dogs, (barkers & biters) are very real.

Back to the matter of the groundhogs. It is the biter type that faces the greatest threat from the ‘hog in the ground. The reason all this is being told is because there seems to be a growing interest in Patterdale Terriers world wide. Folks like to know their dog is descended from “working” stock. In America it’s almost considered “sport” to let your dog into a groundhog’s hole. This has caused breeders to work on producing ever smaller dogs. These days many dogs aren’t physically big enough to carry out the threat they’re trying to offer to the groundhog, (or whatever *beast* is in the hole.) As mentioned above, finding your dog “dead in the ground” is not really a common event. But, if you go after groundhogs very much you can expect to experience this sort of thing once in awhile. This is one reason why some folks prefer a dog that’s a little too big to easily get into a groundhog’s hole. Sadly, size is no guaranty. The big Patterdale Terriers get into groundhog holes all the time, much to the surprise of their owners and onlookers. Being prepared means you must understand the realities of earth work. Good hunting!