

Encounter 54: The Low-Level Dragon Encounter

Difficulty: Severe 3

Day: February 23rd, 2025

Today's encounter comes from a [topic on the Paizo forums](#) that got me to thinking - how low could we go with a solo dragon encounter and make it **satisfying**? That is to say, the question (in essence) that stood out to me was - "Why wouldn't a dragon just fly around and use its breath weapon and never give the PCs a chance to harm it?" Which is a really good question. So, I'm going to break format again to throw together a pretty rough encounter for a young white dragon (dipping into the *Premaster Bestiary* for this one!)

The Question and The Answer(s):

Why wouldn't a dragon just fly around and use its breath weapon and never give the PCs a chance to harm it?"

Assuming that the PCs have no way to deal any damage to a flying opponent (likely, if they're level 3), this is a *really, really* good question that all GMs should have an answer for before they sit down and write their encounters. I'll propose a few answers before we get into the encounter proper.

1. *It just isn't all that effective of a strategy.*

I mean, think about it, the dragon swoops down on the PCs when they're least expecting it and unleashes a Breath Weapon on them for some pretty massive damage. Then it flies away on its next turn. The group now has 1 to 4 rounds to heal up, get to cover, and run away. Sure, the dragon could get very lucky and string together a number of 1 round intervals to really harass the PCs, but that brings us to the next point.

2. *Intelligent opponents are not going to stay clumped together unless they are forced to.*

Breath Weapon has a set area it can fire upon and is really only best when it can target at least a few PCs. If the whole group eats a Breath Weapon and then scatters, the dragon isn't exactly going to make any ground by using 1 to 4 rounds just to deal a great amount of damage to a single target while the PCs have (presumably) 12 actions a turn to deal with it.

3. *And the answer that I, unfortunately, favor most: Because that isn't fun.*

I love verisimilitude and it's something that drew me to TTRPGs to begin with. It's something 1st edition did well (not perfectly, but really well). And honestly, 2nd edition still does a great job with it despite having to abstract a lot of things for the sake of mechanics. But when you lean too heavily on verisimilitude, you get questions like "Why doesn't an ancient dragon just wipe out the PCs when they're level 2?" or "Why don't the big bads send a group of much higher-level assassins to wipe the floor with the group?" It wouldn't be fun. The math of the game is skewed too heavily in the favor of the opposition.

So let's take a look at what we can learn from these three points. Flight is good, but it has its limitations (the most obvious being the requirement to always spend an action Flying). The

creature may be putting themselves out of harm's way, but it's also protecting the PCs in a sense. It gives them breathing room to collect themselves and formulate a plan to deal with it - even if "dealing with it" is just running for cover, Hiding, and Sneaking away.

The other thing we can learn is that Breath Weapon is an *iconic* ability for dragons that... everyone knows about. You see the dragon and you immediately spread out so that the entire group isn't getting caught at once. As GMs, we want to either introduce terrain that makes doing so difficult or disadvantaged or capitalize on the PCs spreading out. This keeps the iconic Breath Weapon a deadly threat at all times.

And finally, fun. If - for some reason - the dragon would just do better flying in the sky, then we need to give the players tools to engage with the game so they can play, too. We've already seen a similar rant of mine in [Day 31: We're Going On A Linnorm Hunt](#), but our encounter is going to be taking place at level 3, so we can't assume that PCs will be prepared in any way to deal with a flying opponent. As such, we should be dealing with this as an encounter design problem and not a creature design problem.

Okay, that was a lot of words to say... let's make an absolute terror of an encounter.

The Creatures:

- [Young White Dragon](#)

The Map: [Winter Forest Flip-Mat](#)*

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**I tossed in a tower from the [City Gates Flip-Mat](#) to make this encounter the way I wanted it.*

The Encounter:

So it's important to establish some context here. Why are the PCs in the area and what goals does the dragon have? If the PCs have come to hunt the dragon, there's less that we as GMs should be handing to the group - they have made the necessary preparations. If the dragon is aiming to kill the PCs, then its tactics would change. So, let's set the scene:

The PCs are unaware of a dragon in the area and are moving from one location to the next. They are following a frozen river when the sound of beating wings and icy blue eyes greet them from the haze! They're under attack! The dragon has claimed this area as its territory and is on the hunt for an easy meal - something it hasn't yet determined that the PCs are. It's cautious and wants the group gone, preferably with their death.

Now, let's talk about flight real fast, or more accurately, what can 3rd level characters do about flying enemies? Let's make a quick list.

- Ranged attacks, either weapons or spells

- Readied actions to attack or disable when the flier gets close enough
 - Trip them so they [reach the ground](#) (Tripped fliers fall)
 - Grapple to keep them grabbed on the ground or (if you're lucky) restrained so they can't Fly
- Somehow immobilize the flier (critical success from a [tangle vine](#), critical failure from [web](#) - honorable mention to [tether](#) from Gods and Magic)
- Hide and Sneak until you either escape or force the flier to get within Striking range

Those tactics do *not* look reliable enough to pin an entire encounter on. That said, we are going to give the group some options here. Let's talk about the disadvantages first.

The icy river and lake are very slippery, requiring DC 18 Acrobatics checks to Balance across. The dragon can safely ignore this with its Ice Climb ability. Should it resort to fighting on the ground, it would prefer to be here where it has the advantage. If you are a *cruel* GM (or really want to make this dragon a recurring opponent), this could be taking place in a snowstorm which grants concealment to everyone within (except the dragon can ignore this with its Snow Vision).

The forest here provides standard cover from above, meaning that any PC within would get a tasty little +2 bonus to Reflex saves against that Breath Weapon and - importantly - a bonus to Stealth as well. That only increases if the PCs decide to [Take Cover](#). I would personally only have the treeline act as lesser cover from opponents on the ground (increasing, of course, to standard cover after the Take Cover action). Now let's talk trees. Trees vary in height, but let's say that they average about 15 feet tall and require DC 15 Athletics checks to Climb. This does give the group a chance - albeit a slim one - to sneakily ascend a tree and Ready an action to Grapple or Trip the dragon as it comes by. Sheesh! Honestly, that's a longshot - the grappler would still need [Titan Wrestler](#), the right place at the right time, and one heck of a good roll.

But then we come to this abandoned watchtower. Why was it abandoned? Well, perhaps the dragon turned out to be quite a big problem and it just wasn't worthwhile to send men out to their deaths. Whatever the case, the door here is missing, allowing for PCs to rush in quickly without having to waste actions opening doors. A winding staircase ascends 15 feet to a landing filled with old supplies and from there, a ladder goes up another 10 feet to a trapdoor that leads out to the rooftop which has crenellations that provide lesser cover. While this makes for a perfect place for the PCs to regroup and plan, it doesn't advance the encounter, unless the goal is to wait out the dragon - which it very well might be. (You could again notch up that cruelty by having the dragon begin to attack the tower, but the stone tower is [pretty darn sturdy](#) and it can give the PCs a chance to counterattack!)

The important thing here are the supplies. Assuming that there were once guards working to keep the area safe from this dragon, there are some special tools here that can be of use to the party. Here's a quick, but not exhaustive list of items that the group could find by Searching/Seeking the supply room:

- [Lesser \(or even Moderate\) alchemist's fire](#)
- [Minor or lesser healing potion](#)
- Scroll of fire-based spells ([blazing armory](#), [breathe fire](#), [blazing bolt](#), etc)
- Longbows with plenty of arrow

These supplies allow the PCs to quickly formulate a plan on how best to fight off the dragon. And here's the fun part - they don't need to win to feel successful. They just need to drive the dragon away. With our set-up, the group is fighting a defensive battle - they can come back later with a more solid plan to enact their revenge. The adventure writes itself!

The Tactics:

Now the conceit of this encounter was that our dragon wants to stay in the air, using its Breath Weapon, and remaining unharmed. But as we noted up top, that doesn't really benefit the dragon much here. I think you could absolutely run it that way for a turn or two, but if the PCs don't have an answer for flight, then they'll likely have fled into the watchtower to find the supplies and prepare to fight back. So, since we went and designed all of these fun options into the encounter, let's *really* look at tactics.

The first is obvious, flight is not going to produce the most devastating damage for our dragon. It should certainly open with its Breath Weapon when it can catch the most PCs in its blast before descending into a Ground Slam and tearing into anyone foolish enough to stay in melee with it by using its Draconic Frenzy. This is where the white dragon will shine and it will make a group unfamiliar with PL+3 encounters regret not thinking their actions through a little bit more. Even when they begin to fight back, its Freezing Blood punishes them!

However, should the group Hide or begin to show how clever they are (sniping at the dragon from behind cover, using fire spells and items, or attempting to keep it from the skies), it should quickly realize that it needs to get more clever if it wants to survive. *Small problem there, historically, white dragons are the dumb ones.* And you can see it in its abilities - it really is just a giant, dumb animal that doesn't have much in the way of tricks up its sleeve. However, it can always play the same game as the PCs, leaping into the forest and hiding among the trees, waiting out its prey or just flying off to track them down later when they're at a more severe disadvantage.

The Conclusion:

I... actually like this encounter a lot more than I thought I would. I think it's an absolute nightmare to be on the receiving end of, but with the right group of players, it could be a real blast. Third level is perhaps the worst for PL+2/PL+3 enemies. You're on the cusp of at least one character getting a *striking weapon* and maybe not everyone even has a +1 weapon yet. Characters have only two class feats (or, heck, really only one if they went with a dedication). HP is still quite low and damage can be swingy. Everything can crit you and death is just around the corner.

But if players are aware of that and respect the power that a dragon has versus them at this time, this could be a memorable night. A group huddling within the watchtower handing out supplies while the dragon batters at the stone walls. The wizard hisses to the rogue, "What do you mean the barbarian is outside?!" The cleric stands atop the tower, throwing alchemist fires down when suddenly the barbarian leaps onto the creature and wrestles it to the ground! Woo! What an image!

Anyway, yeah. Flying and low-levels. I still don't recommend it!