

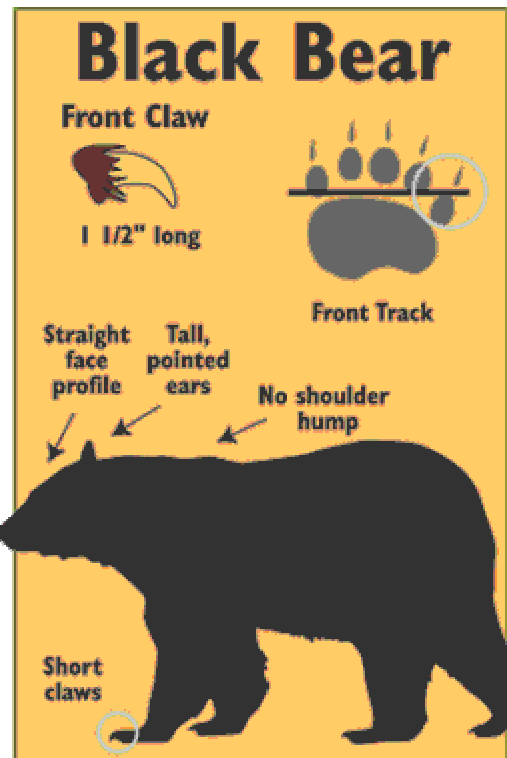
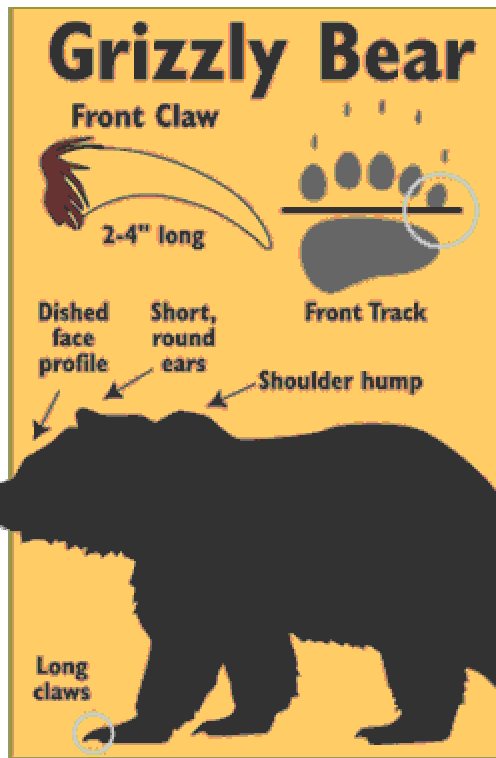
Yellowstone's Griz Recovery



What Does It Mean for Hunters? **BY B. J. Mincher, Ph.D.**

One can only imagine the the bowhunters' elation as they returned to the kill site to pack out the meat. One had shot an elk that morning, recovered it later in the day and then busied himself gutting, skinning, and quartering. It had been a perfect September 2002 day in the Idaho Rockies.

Under blue skies the man had hung the quarters about 15 yards from the gut pile amid lodgepole pines. Later that evening, he and two buddies had hiked back in. But as they crested out on a bench amid dense cover, the elation turned to fear.



Few events in North America are as gut-wrenching as a surprise encounter with a grizzly bear. Peripheral vision instantly vanishes as every sense focuses on those rippling, fur-covered muscles and great, curving claws. Just as the hanging meat sacks became visible to the men, so too did the sow and her two large cubs at the nearby gut pile. The trio of hunters hesitated, then shouted and blew a whistle to drive the intruders away. The bear and her cubs beat it over the side of the ridge.

But that wasn't the end. On a mission to protect her cubs and her elk carcass, she circled behind the men, cutting off their best avenue of escape. Seeing serious trouble now at their rear, they ran toward the gut pile. The sow chased one person, then another. One man put a tree between himself and the enraged bear and struck at her with his pack. When he was attacked, he attempted to fend her off with his bow. During the melee, he was able to nock an arrow and shoot her as she faced him again.

She chased them all a bit longer, taking turns on the men, but then abruptly left the area, cubs in tow. Fortunately, none of the men was seriously hurt. One can only imagine their emotional state.

Griz is Back



The successful recovery of grizzly bears in the Yellowstone means hunters are seeing bears in places unthinkable only a few years ago. Following a few simple precautions can minimize the chances for trouble.

Photo by Chuck Bartelbaugh.

Thirty years after being listed under the Endangered Species Act, the grizzly bear is again becoming a common sight in the Yellowstone area, including nearby Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. There is no doubt that the grizzlies of Yellowstone are increasing in population. Biologists of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, who count sows with cubs from the air, report a population growth rate of about five percent per year.

Preservationists opposed to relaxing Endangered Species Act protections have challenged these results, but they have withstood extensive statistical analyses by professional biologists. There may be as many as 600 bears now from the Idaho/Montana Centennial Mountains in the west to Wyoming's Absarokas in the east. But as this population grows, grizzly social pressures require subadults to colonize new territories.

Unfortunately, true wilderness is finite, even here in the last best places. Ancestral homelands at the edges of Yellowstone and Teton national parks are now crisscrossed with roads, grazing leases and summer homes.

When Man Meets Bear

Because sportsmen seek out lonely and wild places, they sometimes come face to face with members of a recovered grizzly population. Elk and deer hunters today are encountering grizzlies where it was unthinkable only a few years before. The bears literally have nowhere else to go.

Hunting by its very nature requires hunters to be in the bears' habitat, violating the safety rules observed by hikers and others and "setting baits" just when the bear must take in megacalories to survive denning. So, what is a hunter to do? That obviously depends on the situation.

According to Chuck Bartlebaugh, executive director of the Center for Wildlife Information, hunters must remember that "The minute you harvest an animal, you have just set a bear bait." A bear's search for food is continuous, and one could appear at a kill site almost immediately, with the probability increasing with time.

In the case cited earlier, the Idaho Fish and Game investigator's report summarized things this way: "They could have left when they first saw the bear. We discussed the merits of bear spray. I think they will all carry bear spray in the future."

In Bartlebaugh's work, he prepares training materials and conducts workshops for hunters, outfitters, hikers, campers and wildlife photographers in bear country. When a bear is unaware of you, he says, "Do not yell or shout. Go back the way you came, and move only when the bear is preoccupied or feeding." In other words, perform a reverse stalk. It's best if the bear never becomes aware of you. Though grizzlies continue to be vilified in modern sporting literature, the vast majority would rather slink away unseen than risk their lives in a confrontation with a human. Bears usually lose those battles.

The elk was never born that's worth hand-to-hand combat with a grizzly, and any hunter with a conservation ethic will agree that it's also not worth killing or wounding the bear. The bear won't eat a bull's antlers, so they will probably become available later.

A shoot-first and ask-later mentality in hunters won't help bear conservation, or make sportsmen safer. A wounded grizzly is more dangerous than an unharassed one.

According to Lauri Hanauska-Brown, non-game biologist with Idaho Fish and Game, "People need to understand that killing these particular bears is not OK and that it may actually hinder state management in the near future." That's because the Yellowstone population of grizzlies may be removed from Endangered Species Act listing in the near future, with management being returned to the states. Every bear, especially females, counts. When bears are killed in self-defense – or worse, maliciously – it delays delisting, and pushes back the day when they may be legitimately hunted as the great game animal they have the potential to be.

Some pretty well-known authors maintain that a hunter had better be missing a limb or two if he shoots a bear in self-defense. But the Idaho case belies that claim. Although there were things those hunters could have done better, they were exonerated. Evidence at the scene corroborated their story. Investigators concluded, "We felt that the wounding of the bear was probably justified under the circumstances."

Still, had the men carried bear spray, wounding the bear probably would not have been necessary, and a nightmare encounter probably would have been over far sooner. Capsaicin, the spray's active ingredient, causes disabling irritation to eyes, nose, mouth, throat and lungs, and displaces oxygen. Each member of a hunting party should carry it, for his own defense and as a backup for others. A blinded and choking grizzly in rapid retreat is a scenario far superior to a raging charge by a wounded one. As soon as the bear has left the area, so should the people. That way, tomorrow will be another day for both parties.

Bear Awareness

General Norman Schwarzkopf is the national spokesman for bear safety. He works in collaboration with state and federal agencies and the "Be Bear Aware" campaign. The general says, "I'm a pretty good shot, but I carry bear spray when hunting and fishing in bear country. Few people can place an accurate shot under such stressful conditions, and a bear charging through thick brush may not even be visible. With bear spray, you don't have to be a good shot to stop a bear charge."

It's important to carry the right product. The small cans of personal defense sprays commonly marketed are not sufficient defense against bears. Look for large cans registered with the EPA. The label should say that the product is bear spray. Have it ready when field-dressing game.

There are as many scenarios for a grizzly bear encounter as there are bears. The animals' similarity to us is what gets them into trouble. Like most of us, they are big and intelligent, each an individual. That makes them unpredictable. They like the same foods we do, need lots of personal space, and are willing to defend what's theirs – usually food.

Bears consume large quantities of food and are always looking for more, and they have an excellent sense of smell. Guidelines for hunting-camp food storage are publicized by the Center for Wildlife Information. Food, garbage and other attractive items, including toothpaste and deodorant, should be hung at least ten feet above the ground and 100 yards from the tent.

The cooking area, and clothes worn while cooking, should be kept the same distance from the sleeping area. No bear can turn up his nose at our leftovers. If one gets a food reward from your camp, he'll be back. If nothing interests him, he'll move on.



Proper food storage and maintaining a clean camp means bears will have no reason to be attracted. This is a safer situation for bears and hunters. This bear will move on after receiving no "food rewards". Photo by Chuck Bartelbaugh.

Avoid Close Quarters

If hunting is to continue as a sport, not just in bear country but everywhere, the public jury, comprised mostly of nonhunters, must view hunters and sportsmen as conservationists.

Though no legal hunting of grizzlies has been allowed in the Yellowstone ecosystem for many years, 90 percent of grizzly bears still die at the hands of humans. Most are killed in hunting-related incidents, or by the very government agencies designated to ensure recovery. Most wouldn't have to be killed, given a little forethought by their human neighbors. Access to human foods almost always starts the trouble.

On rare occasions, you can do everything right and still walk up on a bear accidentally. Grizzlies don't usually consider humans as food, but they will defend themselves when threatened by an unintentional violation of their personal space.

Hunters pride themselves on acquiring and perfecting outdoor skills like tracking and stalking. Those abilities should include cognizance of your surroundings and how to read bear sign. Avoid areas with tracks, fresh scat, or turned-over logs and rocks. Lots of excavated earth in bear country usually means a bruin digging for roots, ground squirrels, or other tasty morsels.

But should that close-quarters encounter occur, don't run. Experts advise backing away slowly, facing the bear. Talk sternly but calmly, and don't look into its eyes. Let the animal identify you as human but unthreatening. Have your bear spray ready. It's useless in your backpack or back at your pickup. If the bear does charge, it's probably a bluff, but direct a short blast toward the bear, directly below the face. The plume will carry the irritating vapor into his nose, eyes, and lungs.

Protect Hunting, Protect Bears

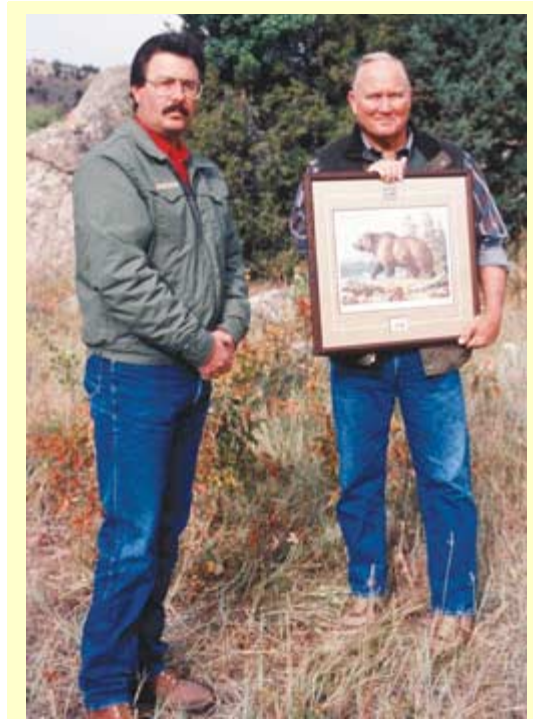
One more type of encounter threatens both grizzly recovery and the future of hunting. Grizzly sow #346, radio-collared since 1999, and her yearling cub lived in deep lodgepole forests in Idaho's Island Park area, her world overlapping that of tourists, hikers and vacation homes.

Most area residents had no idea she was there until September 2002, when she became famous – posthumously. In a malicious case of poaching, she and her cub were shot and left to rot on Sawtell Mountain in the Centennials. Their remains were discovered a month later by a hunter, who reported them to Idaho Fish and Game.

A reward fund was established by hunting and conservation groups (including SCI Idaho), some of which haven't agreed on other issues. But they agree about poachers. Though the bears weren't shot during a firearms season, hunters took the rap in the eyes of the public.

Anti-hunting activists capitalize on such truth-twisting. Preservationists have seriously discussed suing under the Endangered Species Act to ban hunting throughout the Yellowstone ecosystem because hunters have killed grizzlies. Other extremists portray bears to the public as friendly and lovable in an attempt to portray hunters as the bad guys. The unrealistic portrayal of wild animals can be lethal – as demonstrated by the recent case of Timothy Treadwell, killed by bears in Alaska.

If hunting is to continue as a sport, not just in bear country but everywhere, the public jury, comprised mostly of nonhunters, must view hunters and sportsmen as conservationists. And if the return of the grizzly is to be generally welcomed, the animal should inspire more awe and respect than fear. The great bear is an invaluable inheritance that was almost squandered by our predecessors. Passing it on to the future requires only simple changes in our behavior. The animals cannot change theirs.



Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf receives an award and thanks from Wyoming Game and Fish's Dave Moody, for acting as national spokesperson for grizzly bear safety. Photo by LuRay Parker.