

BEAR IN CAMP

by

Sterling D. Miller

The cry “bear in camp!” is sure to raise the blood pressure of both newly-arrived Alaskans and experienced sourdoughs. What happens next, however, usually distinguishes between the two and can mean the difference between a dead or injured bear or, in rare circumstances, injured people. Each year about 50 brown/grizzly bears are shot in Alaska and reported under a provision of state law that permits persons to kill a bear “in defense of their life or property (DLP).” Studies of these shootings reveal that many are unnecessary and could have been avoided if people had understood more about bear biology and behavior. In most cases problems with bears can be avoided before they become fatal for the bear or dangerous to people.

Alaska is home to three kinds of bears, but because few Alaskans will have the opportunity to see a polar bear, this article deals with the black and the brown/grizzly bears that live throughout most of Alaska. The foremost similarity between these two species is that both are insatiably hungry and always on the lookout for the easiest path to a high calorie meal. This is understandable when you consider that bears spend about half of their lives hibernating in dens under the snow. Bears have to eat vigorously for six months to make up for their long fast during the other half of the year. The depth of their hunger is, fortunately, unknown to most of us although their pangs may be somewhat similar to what a dieter feels when watching a companion devour a three-tiered banana split loaded with nuts and whipped cream.

The consequences to a bear of not getting enough food are extreme. If a bear is unable to accumulate a thick layer of fat prior to hibernation, the price that may be paid includes failed pregnancies, dead cubs, or death of the bear itself.

Bears’ insatiable appetites provides the first and most important clue to what you must do to avoid trouble in bear country: **NEVER FEED BEARS!** Unless you have pitched your camp in the middle of a bear trail, a bear in your camp is probably looking for a meal. It’s your responsibility to see that he

doesn’t get it. In fact, it’s your responsibility to avoid a situation where a bear might learn that a meal can be had around people. When in bear country, as a routine practice, you should store your food out of reach of a bear’s paws or nose, in a tree and in air-tight, sealed containers (food cooler chests are not adequate). Never keep food inside your tent unless you want a ripped tent and a pushy bear as a bed companion. If you can’t put your food in a tree or in a cache out of a bear’s reach, then you should try to “booby-trap” your food packs with pots, pans, or other noise-makers arranged in a manner to ensure that a hungry bear will make enough noise to wake you up.

Responsible campers and other residents living in bear country know they must prevent bears from eating human foods. This is not just because they would rather eat their bacon themselves, but rather because they know that bears accustomed to eating human foods probably will die an early death. These deaths don’t result from cholesterol-clogged arteries due to eating fatty human foods. Instead, most bears which have become used to eating campers’ food are shot by frightened people not accustomed to seeing a bear in such close proximity. Others are shot by people trying to protect their property from being destroyed.

State law (5 AAC 92.410) allows people to shoot a bear, or other wildlife, in defense of life or property when:

1. The necessity for the taking is not brought about by harassment or provocation of the animal or an unreasonable invasion of the animal’s habitat; and
2. The necessity for the taking is not brought about by the improper disposal of garbage or a similar attractive nuisance; and
3. All other practical means to protect life and property are exhausted before the game is taken.

Animals under the provisions of this law must be surrendered; for bears this means that the hide and skull must be retrieved and surrendered to ADF&G.

According to a recent study, from 1970-85, 745 bears were



J. Hyde

This bear, originally named 'Jane' is now more commonly known as 'Pest'. Being an opportunist (as all bears are) she has taken advantage of numerous situations in which food items were intentionally

thrown to her or were abandoned as she approached. Her past successes have now developed into a habit which is repeated yearly. This behavior not only endangers visitors to the area but her as well. This development is very unfortunate. First because it could have been prevented and second because the situation is not limited to this animal alone. NEVER abandon food items to an approaching bear. Pick up any food item and take it with you as you slowly and calmly leave the area. Leaving food behind will only prompt a bear to investigate you further or someone else later.



Brown bears can create problems for set net fishermen. Too frequently these conflicts are fatal to bears.

Larry Aumiller

shot and reported in circumstances described as DLP. Of these, about 43 percent were of bears considered immediately threatening, 29 percent were of bears considered potentially dangerous, 21 percent were of bears considered a threat to property, and 7 percent were elimination of nuisance bears.

Information on the sex and age of the bears killed in defense of life or property circumstances provides insights into why bears get into trouble with people. Bears that were killed because they were perceived to be dangerous were usually older (averaging 7.7 years for males and 8.7 years for females) than bears killed to protect property or to eliminate a nuisance (average age was 5.3 years for males and 5.1 for females). This difference probably occurs because younger bears are more likely than older bears to be hungry and to be dispersing into unfamiliar territory where humans live.

Statewide, 31 percent of DLP brown/grizzly bears were killed by hunters. On Kodiak Island, this percentage is nearly double (61 percent). The high density of bears on Kodiak and Afognak Islands and the popularity of deer hunting in this area are the probable reasons. A recent study for the Kodiak area found that deer hunters killed an average of 3.6 DLP bears per year during the last 12 years, 53 percent of these during the past three years. Biologists working in the Kodiak area are concerned that bears are learning to key in on hunters and their deer kills. Hunters have reported a few instances where bears have challenged them for a deer soon after it was killed. Biologists have recommended methods by which hunters can minimize these problems by shooting no more than one deer at a time and quickly getting it cleaned, out of the field, and stored high in a tree or cache where a bear cannot get to it.

On Kodiak, as elsewhere in the state, the dates when most bears are killed in DLP circumstances also correspond with the time when humans are most prevalent in bear habitat. In addition to hunting seasons, many DLP bears are shot during commercial and subsistence fishing seasons because bears like to investigate nets or smokehouses full of fish. Other commercial activities in bear habitat, such as logging or mining, not only destroy bear habitat but also result in increased DLP kills of bears just from the increased close association with people.

Some bears that were killed because they were considered dangerous could more accurately be described as having been shot because people were mistakenly frightened. An example of this kind of fear was evident in a Kenai Peninsula man who shot a DLP brown bear in 1984. The affidavit this man filled out describing the circumstances of this shooting said that the bear was 30 feet away when he shot it and:

"I am not sure whether the bear knew I was present or not, but I was certain that it would know soon, and I feared what he might then do. I therefore decided to seize the element of surprise to the advantage of my own personal survival and killed the bear."

Unprovoked and unexplained attacks on humans by bears have occurred but these are rare. In most cases both black and brown/grizzly bears will try hard to avoid humans once they detect their presence. Correspondingly, your best strategy to avoid sudden confrontations with bears is to advertise your presence with noise and conversation.

It is correct to always respect the strength and occasional unpredictable nature of bears, but too many people have the mistaken view that bears are blood-thirsty animals prone to attack people. This mistaken perception is unfortunately promoted by the gory tales reported by some sensationalist journalists.

Steve Herrero, author of a book on bear attacks, concludes that bear attacks are very rare occurrences. However, he recommends that people should react differently if they are attacked by brown/grizzly bears than if they are attacked by black bears. Attacks by brown/grizzly bears most likely occur because the bear is defending its cubs or cache of food or because it was startled and did not have a chance to recognize that its surprise was caused by a human. In these cases, playing dead and curling up in a fetal position with your arms protecting your head and neck is probably your best option once the bear has made physical contact with you. This behavior gives the bear the chance to recognize that you are no threat to its food or cubs and that you are human. Herrero describes many incidents in which people survived grizzly attacks by playing dead.

Black bears appear naturally less aggressive and less apt to attack humans than brown/grizzly bears. In part this may be because, unlike grizzly bears, black bears evolved in habitats where they could escape from threats by running away or by climbing trees. Herrero suggests that if you are attacked by a black bear (assuming it is not a sow defending her cubs) it is most likely because the bear is starving and views you as a potential meal. In these circumstances the last thing you want to do is pretend to be a pile of dead meat—easy pickings! Instead, you should fight off an attacking black bear using sticks, stones, and, if necessary, your fists.

The number of bears being killed in DLP circumstances is not large enough to threaten the survival of bear populations in most of Alaska. About 95 percent of human-caused bear deaths in Alaska result from closely regulated sport hunting and only 5 percent from DLP incidents. However, in the most densely populated areas around Anchorage and on the Kenai Peninsula areas, a higher percentage (24 percent) of brown/grizzly bear deaths result from DLP incidents. This pattern shows that biologists must continue to closely monitor DLP incidents to assure that the accelerated rate of settlement and development that has occurred in Alaska in the last few decades does not eliminate the potential for Alaska to continue to be the last stronghold of these animals in the United States.

For additional reading on bears and DLP kills in Alaska, see the following book and articles: *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance* by Steve Herrero (Nick Lyons Books, Winchester Press, 1985); *Characteristics of Nonsport Brown Bear Deaths in Alaska* by S.D. Miller and M.A. Chihuly (International Conference on Bear Research and Management, Vol. 7, in press); and *Brown Bear Problems Related to Expanding Human Activity in the Kodiak Archipelago, Alaska* by R.B. Smith, V. G. Barnes, and L.J. Van Daele (Bear-People Conflicts Symposium, 1986, in press).

Sterling Miller is a Game Biologist with the Division of Game, ADF&G, Anchorage.

Alaska Fish & Game

November-December 1987

\$2.00

