

Grizzly Encounter

by
Kirk Robinson

It was like receiving an electric shock through the eyes. We were face to face, 40 feet of space between him and me – between 700 pounds of muscle, sharp claws and teeth and my soft body. In two seconds flat I might be dead. I realized all this in the very same instant that I recognized the beast as a grizzly bear. There was no discernible gap between the two realizations. In that same instant, I also knew that I could not possibly outrun him. In short, I knew that this might be my last conscious experience, or perhaps the next to last, to be followed by excruciating pain – a thought that was drenched in pure fear. My only hope was that he would not charge. Nevertheless, instinctively my hand went to the canister of pepper spray hanging on my belt, just in case, as I began to step slowly backward, my head turned to the side to avert a direct stare that might be interpreted as aggression. “You are very beautiful,” I said softly. “You have nothing to fear from me.” “Good bear.”

The pepper spray was designed to deter bears if they should attack. It had been tested on live grizzlies and found to work. However, it only works if you can get it out of its holster, aim it and pull the trigger fast enough. In this case that would have been about two seconds, allowing for a slow start on the bear’s part. A grizzly bear can achieve a burst of speed of 35-40 mph almost instantly and can easily run uphill or downhill. I might have been able to achieve 12 mph – a bad move that might itself trigger an attack and gain me at most another second of life. But I knew that would be a mistake. It is not good to act like prey in the presence of a large predator.

Immediately following the initial sudden rush of adrenalin, another thought entered my mind: “I’m still alive, which means he hasn’t charged, which means he isn’t going to, which means I’m going to live! – cognized all at once, without any conscious inferences, as in a flash of insight.

I continued to back slowly away upslope, avoiding direct eye contact with the beast that had spared my life. Several seconds later I reached the faint game trail that would take me away from the area and I proceeded to walk along it, north, across the head of a huge slump, toward the 20 foot-high vertical earthen escarpment opposite from where I had walked down. The game trail took me up and out of the slump area, my heart still pounding. From the rim of the escarpment I gazed in search of the grizzly with binoculars. Eventually I espied him, downhill some 30 feet from where I had roused him from his day bed, lying on his back, legs swimming in the air as he scratched his massive back on a bed of pine cones. Then he became still, apparently resuming the nap from which I had so rudely awakened him.

I wanted to observe him through the binoculars when he woke up– after all, this was the first grizzly I had ever seen in the wild – and since I judged that the prevailing winds would not carry my scent toward him, I laid down for a nap too, and waited. This may have been a foolish thing to do, but I felt safe. As Director of Western Wildlife Conservancy and the author of a pamphlet titled “Living with Cougars and Bears,” I thought I knew what I was doing. Actually, I was pretty proud of myself for having followed the instructions I laid out in the pamphlet. But in retrospect, laying there with my eyes closed and a mighty predator close by might not have been a smart thing to do. Fortunately, when I awoke from my nap, I found him peacefully foraging for food below.

Technically, grizzly bears are carnivores because they have carnassial teeth for shearing meat, tendon and bone, but in practice they are omnivorous and generally eat mostly plant material, including roots, tubers, grass and pine nuts.

I had set out earlier that day on a hike along a trail up the Lamar River in the northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park in hesitant hope of seeing a grizzly bear. I knew there were some in the area and had heard that occasionally a grizzly bear would usurp a carcass from the resident Druid wolf pack. The campground host at the Pebble Creek Campground, where I had spent the night, kindly lent me the pepper spray. I hiked for a couple of hours without seeing any wildlife but squirrels and ravens, much to my dismay, finally stopping for a long, lazy lunch. Mid-afternoon I turned back, satisfied that I had at least gotten some exercise.

It was on the hike back that I decided to check out the strange geological feature that I had noticed that morning. It was a large U-shaped slump, perhaps 150 yard across, where the earth had broken away and begun ever so slowly sliding into the Lamar River. This phenomenon I presumed to be caused by underground thermal activity common in Yellowstone. I walked along the rim, looking for a way down. Soon I saw an animal trail leading diagonally down the side and offering just enough footing for me. I took it, intent on walking down slope across the slump to the river for a curious look. The ground was quite hummocky and there was no trail, so my gaze was aimed just a yard ahead of my feet. I don't remember whether I heard or saw the bear first, but suddenly there it was, having just arisen from its day bed beneath a conifer, its small dark inscrutable eyes riveted on me. There was no chance of escape had it decided to charge, and there was no one to help me if it did. I hadn't seen any tracks or indications that

other human beings had bothered to explore this geological oddity and, had the bear attacked, I might have died right there and my remains not been found for a long time. Or, like mountain man Hugh Glass of old, I might have laid there for several days before recovering enough to pull myself out of the crater and crawl to a human encampment. Luckily for me, the bear did not seem alarmed. I surmise that I did not get quite close enough to provoke aggression. Fortunately, he was standing beneath a tree and I was standing in the open, creating the feel of an invisible barrier between us.

My grizzly encounter was pretty tame stuff compared to many I have read or heard about. Old Hugh Glass was roughed up bad. Mountain man Jedediah Smith had his scalp and an ear ripped off, which was crudely sewed back on by Jim Clyman. Both miraculously lived, as did grizzly researcher Barrie Gilbert after being attacked by a sow grizzly with cubs in Yellowstone Park many years ago. These attacks were brought on by an all-too-sudden and close meeting of bear and man. By contrast, there have been other cases where the bear was simply hungry and so stalked, killed and ate a human being as it might a deer. One such example was the incident at Rainbow Point Campground near Hebgen Lake in the summer of 1983. A camper was hauled out of his tent at night, killed and eaten. The grizzly was later destroyed and some of the remains of the hapless camper discovered in its stomach. Then there was grizzly bear fanatic Timothy Treadwell. He and a female friend were killed by a huge, hungry grizzly in Alaska in 2003. Again, the grizzly came in the night and ripped open the tent to get at them. The sound recorder of Tim's movie camera recorded their screams as they were eaten. German filmmaker Werner Herzog made an academy award-winning documentary about this weird, tragic incident using some of Treadwell's own footage.

However, such events are exceedingly rare. As a matter of fact, the more even-tempered black bear has killed more people in North America than the grizzly has. And domestic dogs have killed a lot more than that.

Not long after my grizzly encounter, I met a woman who had gone to Yellowstone to “get close to” a grizzly bear. She had come to have the strange opinion that so long as she was not afraid of death, nothing could touch her. After all, hadn’t she somewhat miraculously recovered from an automobile accident? She happened to find a grizzly somewhere along the highway between Lakeside and Sylvan Pass peacefully foraging in a meadow. She watched it for a couple of hours, following along as it moved about. Like Treadwell, she convinced herself that she had developed some sort of mystical bond with the beast and that it would not attack her. And luckily for her, it didn’t, which she took as confirmation of her psychic correctness.

I am glad to have had my grizzly experience, but I am not particularly anxious to have another one at all like the first one. I certainly don’t think I can befriend them or develop some sort of special bond with them. There is a big psychic gulf between their world and ours. But their bare presence puts a hefty dose of wild in wildness and adds greatly to any wilderness experience. I am glad they are out there. For me it is enough just to know this and to respect the space they need to survive.

After Bountiful High School Kirk went on to serve an LDS mission, attend Weber State College, University of Utah, and the University of Cincinnati, obtaining a Ph.D. in philosophy. He taught in several colleges and universities, and is now serving as the founding director of the Western Wildlife Conservancy, a conservation group dedicated to the protection of large western carnivores (like the one he politely entertained in this account).