

# Face to Face

What I learned from an angry grizzly bear *By Jessie Grossman*



A CALM FEAR “It’s okay, I don’t want to hurt you,” I said, as she continued toward me.

You’d think that on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, I’d have had plenty of time to do everything I wanted to get done. But as usual, that was not the case. I’d planned to work and do chores, then take a walk starting in the early afternoon. But I tried to accomplish too much, and so it was not until late afternoon—though with five or six good hours of daylight remaining—that I began my hike.

I made my way along a sweet narrow tributary of the Yaak River, past beaver ponds with dragonflies and paddling ducks, through a forest of mature lodgepole pine. Here, on the same date the previous year, I’d seen grizzly tracks in the mud.

Walking up the trail, watching the lattice of shadows lengthen under the timber, I was trying my best to leave work behind so I could enjoy my hike.

My scattered and distracted thoughts kept me from seeing the small bear in the tree until I stood beneath it. The subadult bear—no longer a cub, but not fully mature—was startled, hissing and moaning and squirming, struggling to stay on the limb around which it had wrapped its arms and legs.

It was a dark bear. At first I thought it

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might be a grizzly, and if its mother was nearby she might attack, concerned that I was endangering her young. But maybe it was a young black bear, whose mother would be more likely to just watch and wait for my departure. I took a few steps back and looked around for the mother, but saw nothing. As on most of my backcountry rambles, I had a canister of bear pepper spray holstered on my hip.

Not wanting to further stress the bear in the tree, and to move away from a potentially dangerous situation, I began to walk away.

Suddenly a large grizzly bear stood up from behind a rise, 30 yards away. While the young bear’s identity had been ambiguous, there was no mistaking this mother grizzly—big round face and shoulder hump. We were already close when we saw each other. She didn’t give the warning signs I had heard about—no jaw popping, gnashing, or huffing. She swayed her huge body from side to side.

It’s cliché to say that time slowed way down when the bear dropped her front legs and charged, but that’s what seemed to happen. The bear had a radio collar around her neck, put there by biologists who track the Yaak’s small population using radio telemetry. It hung loose and swung like a necklace as she charged. Her fur had the blonde sheen of August-dry grass, and her skin seemed loose on her body, rippling with her

movement. As her paws hit the ground, it sounded as though the forest floor was hollow. I saw her claws in an uncomfortable degree of detail, and they seemed extraordinarily long. When it became clear she wasn’t about to turn away, I aimed at her and discharged a cloud of bear spray.

The grizzly turned and ran back up the hill toward where her cub, which had scooped down out of the tree, had raced into the timber. I assumed the encounter was over.

But then at the top of the rise she turned and charged again, though this time less

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threateningly. Her body language seemed to say, *I don’t really want to do this, just leave me alone.* I was surprised at how calm I felt. I had not known it possible to experience deep calm and deep fear at the same time. I talked to the grizzly, quiet but assertive. “It’s okay,

I don’t want to hurt you,” I said as she continued toward me. She then veered off and ran back uphill before I could discharge the bear spray a second time. I listened to the diminishing sound of her moving through the woods, deep into the drainage where I had originally planned to walk.

Then the woods were quiet. I walked back to the car, trembling.

In the following days, I obsessed over the bear, wanting to know as much as I could about her. I described my experience to Wayne Kasworm, the local U.S Fish & Wildlife Service grizzly biologist. He knew which grizzly I had encountered and told me about her lineage in the Yaak and reputation for being bold and curious.

As with all grizzlies that have been trapped and collared, this one had an identification number. Biologists use the number as they track bears to learn how they behave, where they den, if they’re reproducing, where they travel, and if they’re still alive. Kasworm said this bear had offspring that lived nearby. When I called him a few days later, after he had flown over the Yaak in an airplane to track the Yaak grizzlies’ radio collar data points, he said she had crossed a road and run far away, into another drainage.

I couldn’t stop wondering about my encounter. What might have happened if I hadn’t used the bear spray? I like to think her

charge would have been a bluff, that she still would have turned away at the last minute. But the truth is, I don’t know what decision she would have made.

What I do know, from Kasworm and other bear experts, is that if she had attacked, I likely would have survived. Lethal attacks are rare.

As for what happens to an aggressive bear, that depends. It might learn that confronting a human has, at first, no consequences and attack someone else. But bears that repeatedly attack people and cause injury are eventually trapped and killed.

If I’d been carrying a firearm, I might have wounded the grizzly, making her even more enraged and dangerous. Or I might have killed her, perhaps unnecessarily. There’s no knowing the bear’s intentions, only statistically what usually does and doesn’t happen with bear encounters.

A friend later said that if you don’t want to kill a bear, you need to go into grizzly country *prepared* not to kill one. If you bring a gun rather than bear spray, the result could be either a dead bear or a wounded and enraged one, with potentially lethal consequences for you.

Alternatively, if you go into grizzly country without bear spray and are attacked and injured, biologists might have to capture and kill the bear. Bottom line: Carrying bear

spray doesn’t just protect you. It protects grizzlies, too.

I’ve been guilty of not always remembering bear spray when I go into the woods. No longer. It weighs next to nothing. And, as I learned, it works.

The Yaak is home to only 20 grizzlies. The death of even one would greatly affect the population. Who would want to be responsible for that?

Now when I see bear prints, scat, or fur snagged on tree trunks, I am reminded that western Montana is home to real grizzlies, each one singularly important. It’s our responsibility—our privilege, really, considering how few people in this world actually experience grizzly country—to honor these bears. That means protecting and preparing ourselves when we enter the lands we share with them. 🐻

## Expert advice on hiking in grizzly country.

FWP offers tips and instructional videos on staying safe while hiking, hunting, and camping in bear habitat—which now is most of western Montana. Visit the FWP website at [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov) and search for “Be Bear Aware.”

