

BECOMING AWARE OF THE BEAR

As Montana's grizzly numbers grow and the bears remain active well into the big game season, hunters need to be more alert than ever. **BY SCOTT MCMILLION**

If you hunt in grizzly country—which includes most of the western one-third of Montana—chances are you're breaking the rules.

That's because you creep around. You hunt during early morning and evening. You mask your scent and walk into the wind. You usually hunt solo. You stay intensely focused on your prey. This is what hunting requires.

But it's also the opposite of what bear safety experts say you should do in grizzly country. Their advice? Make plenty of noise. Travel in groups. Avoid the hours of dawn and dusk, when bears are most active.

Most times, hunters get away with breaking these rules. Few see a grizzly, and even fewer have what wildlife officials call an "encounter." Grizzly attacks remain extremely rare in Montana. But the potential for dangerous encounters remains. And because of expanding grizzly numbers and bears going into hibernation later in the fall, the risk is growing. Though the odds remain slim that you will ever run into a grizzly, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks officials are increasingly warning hunters in bear country to take steps to avoid encounters and be prepared for a bear attack. Because they do happen.

LIKE A RAG DOLL

Sonja Crowley and Joe Heimer were looking for elk on November 8, 1996, but they found grizzly bears instead. It happened just north of Yellowstone National Park's boundary, on an unseasonably warm day that left the ground covered with thick, sticky snow.

Crowley, of South Dakota, and Heimer, her Montana guide, saw the female bear from about 60 feet away and three cubs 100

feet farther back. The hunters stopped moving, then backed off another 50 feet and stepped behind a bush. They didn't shout or make other noises, but something attracted the bear's attention and she charged. Heimer, who had spent a lifetime in grizzly country, was carrying his client's gun but held his fire, waiting for the bear to veer off. He'd been bluff-charged before.

But the bear didn't stop, so Heimer fired a round from the 7mm Magnum when the grizzly sow was almost to his gun muzzle. Somehow he missed and the bear tackled him, knocking the rifle from his hands and tearing into his legs with teeth and claws.

Heimer fought back, twisting the bear's upper lip in one hand and slugging its head with the other. He thinks he slowed the bear down, kept it from his vitals. Unfortunately, after the grizzly dropped him it focused instead on Crowley, who had dashed for the gun in the snow.

She didn't get far before the bear grabbed her by the head, crushing her jaw and tearing apart her face. The grizzly slung her around like a rag doll, Heimer later recalled. Crowley remembered hearing the teeth crunching into her head.



WHO'S THERE? A grizzly bear will almost always do its best to avoid hunters if it can smell or hear them approaching.

KERRY T. NICKOU



"DANGEROUS SPORT" BY PHILIP R. GOODWIN, 1892-1935. NEIL E. SNYDER COLLECTION

DON'T SHOOT A painting from the early 1900s depicts a hunter about to shoot a grizzly that appears to be standing up to investigate danger. Grizzly experts say a confrontation like this today would be best resolved using bear spray, not a gun.

Heimer staggered to his feet and grabbed the gun, but realized he couldn't shoot and risk hitting Crowley, who was completely limp. Then the bear dropped her and ran back toward its cubs. Heimer began tending to his client. As he wrapped his shirt around her mangled face, Crowley pointed. The grizzly was coming back.

This time, Heimer didn't wait. He put a round through the bear's shoulder and it dropped.

He turned again to Crowley and her wounds, but the bear wasn't done. It had begun another charge. This time, Heimer put it down for good.

The Heimer-Crowley story illustrates a few things about grizzlies. The bears have a "safety zone." It might be just a few yards wide or 100 yards wide, depending on circumstances. You enter that zone at your own risk. Females with cubs are fiercely protective. Running can trigger a chase response. Grizzly bears don't die easily, even if you're an experienced shooter with a high-powered firearm.

Heimer and Crowley are 2 of the 22 people who have been injured by grizzlies since 1990 in the Montana section of the greater Yellowstone National Park area, according to statistics kept by Kevin Frey, FWP bear management specialist in Bozeman. That's an average of only about one per year. In other parts of the state, injuries from

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bear encounters are even rarer. Tim Manley, FWP bear management specialist in thickly wooded northwestern Montana—home to many grizzlies—has not heard of a single hunter injured by a bear during 16 years on the job. Along the Rocky Mountain Front, grizzlies have injured only two hunters in the last 25 years, according to Mike Madel, bear management specialist in Choteau. In western Montana, Missoula-based bear management specialist Jamie Jonkel says he knows of only one attack on a hunter since the 1960s. But that one, sadly, was fatal. In 2001, Timothy Hilston, a 50-year-old Great Falls man, was killed by a female grizzly and her cubs in the Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area while field dressing an elk he had just shot.

Frey once calculated that only 4 out of

every 10,000 hunters in the Yellowstone area have bear encounters, which, while they can scare the pants off people, usually end without injury. "You have a bigger chance of getting hurt in a car," he says. But he also calculated that of the 22 attacks near Yellowstone, 72 percent of the victims were hunters.

Frey says grizzlies usually move away from the sound or smell of an approaching human. But because hunters are usually sneaking quietly through the woods, trying not to make noise, they often surprise a bear, triggering a defensive attack.

FOOD OBSESSED

Further increasing the odds of a grizzly encounter is the fact that hunters take to the field right when bears are most fixated on food. In fall, bears enter a stage called hyper-



NO SHARING A grizzly lunges toward scavengers as it guards an elk carcass. In fall, as bears single-mindedly devour food to carry them through winter hibernation, they pay less attention to approaching hunters, increasing the risk of an accidental encounter.

W. STEVE SHERMAN

phagia, a single-minded lust for calories in advance of their long winter's sleep. When grizzlies find food, they can become so engrossed in eating they pay less attention to their surroundings than usual. That's when a stealthy hunter could inadvertently stumble upon a bear.

How a grizzly reacts depends in part on how it perceives the intruder in its safety zone. Bears read the intruder's body language to help make that decision. That's why most bear experts advise people to avoid eye contact but speak to the bear, saying things like "Whoa, bear. I'm leaving, bear." Of course, bears can't understand the words, but they seem to respond to a reassuring, nonthreatening tone and posture. "The key is to not yell or do anything the bear will perceive as a challenge," says Frey.

Hyperphagia can also mean bears are especially protective of food supplies. A grizzly that's feeding is more likely to be aggressive than one that's simply ambling along.

Another factor that could increase bear encounters with hunters is delayed bear hibernation. Twenty years ago, most grizzlies were asleep in their dens by mid-November. But during the recent spate of warm falls, bears have remained active throughout the general hunting season, adding to the possibility of encounters. "We're now spotting bears well into December," Jonkel says.

What's more, Montana's grizzly bear population is growing and expanding, with bears



GRIZZLY AHEAD? In prime bear country like this, hunters should be especially alert for tracks, scat, and movement that could indicate a nearby grizzly.

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turning up in areas where they haven't been seen in decades. As core habitat fills in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems, bears are dispersing into landscapes their ancestors once prowled. Last summer, a grizzly was captured near Loma, halfway between Great Falls and Havre. In recent years, state and federal bear specialists have captured and radio-collared grizzlies near Red Lodge and in the Madison and Gravelly ranges. One was killed as far west as Idaho's Clearwater River drainage, and another not far from Dillon. They've also been confirmed near Anaconda. Grizzly bears are not relegated to wilderness and national parks anymore, says Frey. "If it's good grizzly

bear habitat and anywhere near those core areas, over time you can expect bears to work their way into it," he says. Hunters need to know this. And not just big game hunters.

NEVER SAW THE BEAR

Brian Grand and three companions were working the brushy bottoms of Dupuyer Creek on the third day of pheasant season in 2007. They had three dogs with them and were shooting a few birds out in the prairie, roughly 15 miles east of the Rocky Mountain Front.

It was about 1:30 in the afternoon when all hell broke loose. Grand didn't know it, but his search for pheasants was taking him



LUKE DURAN/MONTANA OUTDOORS

Carry a Can of Bear-B-Gone

FWP's four bear management specialists strongly endorse bear pepper spray for hunters and others recreating or working in grizzly country. Some tips on which sprays to buy and how to use them:

- Of the several brands on the market, choose one designed specifically for use on bears and registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- The canister should weigh at least 7.9 ounces and the spray must include active ingredients—capsaicin and related capsaicinoids, the chemicals that make peppers hot—at a level of at least 1.3 percent, preferably 2 percent.
- The product should have a spray time of six to nine seconds, enough to create a sizable cloud, and it should have a range of 25 feet.

- Once you select a spray, make sure you're familiar with it. Practice taking it in and out of the holster, which you should carry on your belt or backpack strap.
- Learn how the safety clip works.
- Test the spray with a quick blast to make sure the canister works, but do so before you begin hunting. Test it in an isolated area far from others, with the wind at your back. It's powerful stuff.
- Bear spray does no good in the bottom of your pack or in your car. Keep it handy in cooking areas, in your tent at night, and while field dressing an animal or packing meat out.
- If a bear charges you at close range, aim slightly down and toward the animal. Adjust for any crosswinds. Give the bear a brief dose when it gets to within about 25 feet, and be ready to spray again if the charge continues.
- Once the bear retreats, you should do the same. But don't run. This can trigger a chase response. Slowly back off.
- There's a chance after a discharge that you'll get some spray on yourself. The discomfort can be significant, but it's temporary and doesn't compare to what a grizzly bear could have done to you.
- Don't store bear spray in your car on a hot day. Canisters have been known to explode.
- Pay attention to the expiration date.
- Bear spray is not like bug spray. Don't apply it preventively to skin, tents, boats, clothing, or other gear.

directly toward a grizzly bedded in a thick copse of red willows. When he saw the bear, it was 30 feet away, in full charge. Grand tried to step out of the way, but the bear was on him. “It just literally took me out,” Grand says.

He wrapped his arms around his neck and tucked into a fetal position. The bear rolled him over three or four times, biting and clawing. “Somewhere in that, my gun went off,” Grand says. “I don’t even remember it.”

Grand’s injuries put him in the hospital for six days. He estimates the attack lasted all of ten seconds.

His nearby companions heard the ruckus, but never saw the bear.

Madel says there have been several other incidents along the Front where pheasant hunters encountered grizzlies. In all the other cases, the bears ran off without incident.

In Grand’s case, the hunters had already passed by the bedded bear once, and Madel says it was certainly aware of them and possibly was feeling more pressured when they returned. When it started running, it might have been chasing a dog or trying to escape to thicker cover, he says. Judging by the amount of loose bear stool at the scene of the attack, Madel suspects the animal was highly stressed. “Then the hunter was right there, an immediate threat, so the bear attacked and then was off,” he says.

There are other lessons here. Grizzly bears rarely kill people, though they could do so with ease. Usually when they see humans as a threat, they leave once the threat has been neutralized. Most people walk away from a grizzly attack (though the wounds can last a



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

Keep food in, bears out

The U.S. Forest Service now requires hunters and other campers to follow strict food storage guidelines to reduce bear conflicts. All food and garbage, including food for livestock, must be suspended at least 10 feet off the ground or stored in a hard-sided camper, vehicle trunk, cab, or bear-resistant container approved by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. To see the boundaries where the regulations apply, check the website of the national forest you hunt.

For a list of IGBC-approved bear-proof containers, visit igbconline.org/html/container.html.

long time). Also, you don’t have to be hunting big game in the mountains to run into grizzlies. Bird hunters in and near grizzly range need to be careful, too.

ANCIENT SKILLS

Does all this mean hunters in grizzly country need to start hunting in groups, singing, and blowing whistles? Obviously not, says Jonkel. But hunters need to “relearn our ancient skills,” the bear management specialist says. He notes that humans and grizzlies coexisted in North America for thousands of years. Native Americans, armed only with weapons of stone and wood, lived among much more bounteous grizzly populations. They survived by staying constantly alert. Bear experts advise modern hunters to do the same: Watch for scat, tracks, and other sign; avoid thick cover; steer clear of carcasses; and don’t become so focused on following prey that you stumble onto a bear. “You always have to ‘think grizzly’ when you’re out there,” Jonkel says.

“When you shoot, be aware that now

you’ve set the table,” he adds. Grizzlies aren’t likely to run toward a rifle shot like it’s a dinner bell, but they know that people with guns can produce a big meal. In some cases, they’ve been known to chase hunters off a carcass. If that happens, back off and let the bear have its meal.

Another safety essential: Carry bear spray. Tom Smith, for many years a biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey and now at Brigham Young University, has studied bear attacks for nearly two decades. He looked at 72 instances of people using bear spray to defend themselves from aggressive grizzlies in Alaska. In those cases, 98 percent of the people suffered no injuries and the rest suffered only minor injuries. He also analyzed 300 incidents in which people used guns to protect themselves. In those cases, 40 percent were injured, including 23 deaths and 16 severe injuries.

Some hunters still insist bear spray is impractical and awkward to reach, especially when a hunter already has both hands occu-

ried by a firearm. But Smith notes that guns aren’t always accessible during much of the hunting process, particularly when you’re field dressing, butchering, or hauling meat. Your gun might be over your shoulder or leaning against a tree. But bear spray can be right there in the holster on your belt.

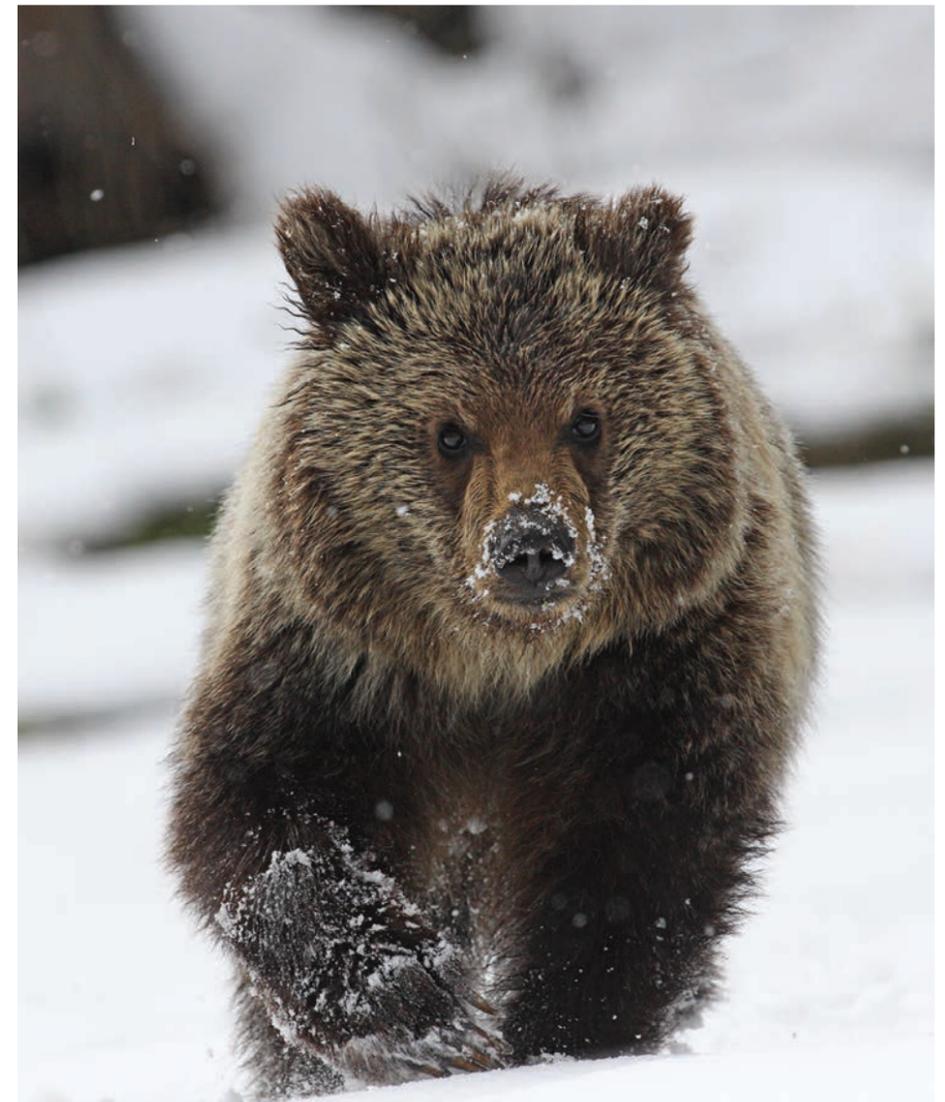
What’s more, bear spray spews a wide fog of intensely hot pepper solution. When people shoot charging grizzlies, they often miss or wound the bear, making it even more aggressive. Most bears that catch even a whiff of the spray turn and run.

Despite the spray’s effectiveness, Frey cautions hunters to not put themselves in a position where they have to use it. Avoid trouble in the first place, he says. The best way to do that is to pay attention. Open your eyes, your ears, and your nose. Think grizzly.

Successful hunters are good at navigating in the natural world. And they respect its potential dangers, such as getting lost, tumbling off a cliff, or succumbing to hypothermia. They do what it takes to avoid those hazards by making plans, paying attention, and, when necessary, coming up with alternatives.

Consider grizzlies just another outdoor hazard. Then takes steps to avoid encounters and prepare for an attack. It likely won’t happen, but if it does, like any smart hunter faced with a challenge, you’ll be ready. 🐻

► Visit the FWP website for more information on how to avoid conflicts with grizzly bears. Go to fwp.mt.gov and search “grizzly bear safety.” FWP’s bear management specialists also recommend the DVD “Staying Safe in Bear Country,” available at alaskageographic.org.



STILL OUT THERE The recent spate of warm falls across much of grizzly country has kept many bears from hibernating until well after big game season begins, increasing the risk of incidents with hunters.

SAM ZIERKE



DERBA KRANTZ

Carcass management in grizzly bear world

Most advice for hunting in bear country is easy to follow: Pay attention, watch your surroundings, have a hunting partner nearby, and carry bear spray.

A harder one is keeping food items—which include your dead game animal—out of reach of a bear. That means keeping the lowest point at least 10 feet off the ground. That’s a challenge with a 500-

pound elk carcass, even if you quarter the animal, but it can be done using ropes and pulleys.

Sometimes hunters have little choice but to leave their meat overnight until they can pack it out the next day. To the rescue is a relatively inexpensive device designed to repel small animal pests that also keeps bears away from meat. The Critter Gitter is a lightweight gadget, small enough to fit in a pocket, that uses sensors to detect heat and motion. When an animal approaches, it emits a 110-decibel

squawk and flashes bright lights. Then it resets and, if the animal returns, produces a different noise and light pattern. The Critter Gitter was made to repel deer, raccoons, and skunks, but Tim Manley, FWP bear management specialist in northwestern Montana, says it also can be effective at keeping bears off a carcass. The device costs about \$50 and is available at crittergittersensor.com.



The Critter Gitter can scare bears away from a carcass left overnight.

Since grizzlies are known to cruise areas where hunters are killing large numbers of big game animals, it’s also a good idea to haul the gut pile well away from the carcass. A small tarp or space blanket makes this easier. Grizzlies usually tear into a gut pile before feeding on the carcass. “At least it keeps the grizzly bear busy for 24 hours or so,” says Jamie Jonkel, FWP bear management

specialist in Missoula.

If you must leave a carcass overnight, move it to where you can see it from 200 yards away, then cover it with a tarp, branches, or clothing. Observe the scene carefully when you return the next morning. A tarp or branches won’t protect the carcass from bears, but you’ll be able to tell if something has disturbed your kill by any changes to the covering material.

For more information on hunting in grizzly country, visit fwp.mt.gov or centerforwildlifeinformation.org.