

Coping With Wild Animal Attacks Involves Common Sense, Respect

By KIM HEACOX
National Geographic
News Service

WEST THUMB, Wyo.—High on a ridge in Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park, a hiker crosses the timberline and enters a subalpine meadow of waist-high grasses. Up ahead, something moves.

It's a grizzly bear about 100 feet away. The bear rises nine feet tall onto its hind legs, waves its nose in the air, drops onto four legs, and begins to run straight at the hiker. There is no tree to climb; nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and the hiker has no gun. What should he do?

This desperate thought has run through the minds of many people.

"When I saw that bear come smoking down on me," says Montana hunting guide Bill Hill, "I didn't have any trouble deciding who was the endangered species."

Sometimes Both Die

Every summer, from Wyoming to Alaska, humans and bears have fatal encounters. Sometimes the human dies, sometimes the bear, sometimes both.

Visits to U.S. national parks have nearly tripled in the last 10 years. More people are hiking the trails and meeting not just bears, but other potentially dangerous wildlife species.

A young boy trying to feed a deer in California's Yosemite National Park was suddenly gored and killed.

A photographer in Yellowstone was fatally attacked when he tried to pet a bison.

A moose trampled a sled-dog musher and his dogs when they surprised it on a snowy trail in central Alaska.

A well-meaning woman found an injured heron in Louisiana and, as she reached out to help the frightened bird, it whipped around its dagger-like beak and impaled her through the neck. She died instantly.

"I remember that fellow killed by the bison," says Yellowstone ranger Fred Hirschmann. "He was trying to pat it on the head. We don't go around patting each other on our heads, do we? Enough is enough."

Wildlife biologists contend that fatal and injurious encounters between people and wildlife result from human ignorance, not animal aggression.

"Bears aren't out there plotting murder," says Kathy Johe, resource-management specialist at Alaska's Katmai National Park. "They have better things to do. I've seen bears repeatedly charge and growl at photographers, fishermen, and campers. None of those charges was unprovoked. In every case the person either frightened or irritated the bear. It doesn't have to happen."

Johe believes that most people don't know how to avoid bear encounters or how to react once an encounter begins.

Swift Predators

"Grizzly bears are predators," she says. "You can't out-

run them unless there is a safe shelter nearby. An animal that runs probably evokes within the bear a predator response, so the bear gives chase."

Moose, on the other hand, are a prey species. A full-grown Alaska bull moose stands six feet tall at the shoulders and weighs 1,600 pounds. One kick can kill a man. A charging moose is as dangerous as a charging bear.

"Maybe more dangerous," adds Kathy Johe, "since bears often 'bluff charge,' turning around at the last moment, and moose do not."

Moose have a distinct territory within which any intruder is fiercely attacked, and outside of which he is tolerated. If the intruder runs away fast enough and far enough, the moose will stop.

The Park Service and other U.S. public lands agencies now publish booklets that tell how to avoid dangerous encounters with wildlife.

The advice includes checking for scorpions in your boots in the desert in the morning, wearing the proper footwear in rattlesnake country, knowing how to recognize rabid raccoons, and learning the subtle signs on the back of an animal's neck that in effect say: "You're too close."

"It's not aggression that sparks a charging bison, bear, or moose," says Johe. "It's fear. A frightened animal has only two options: fight or flight. Bears seldom choose to fight, but when they do, you're in trouble."

The best solution, rangers say, is to avoid the encounter in the first place. Read the literature and follow the recommendations, they advise. A stranger about to enter a wilderness receives all kinds of advice. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't and sometimes it's just the opposite of what one ought to be doing.

Hard to Predict

What even a local expert cannot predict is how an individual bear might react differently from other bears in the same region. Rangers agree that people who cannot avoid grizzly bears and other dangerous animals should at least avoid surprising them.

Wildlife biologists admit that a vacationer may feel like the endangered species when faced with a charging bear, but they point out that for every grizzly bear in North America there are roughly 20,000 humans. Which species, man or bear, is truly endangered, they ask.

Some scientists predict that by the year 2000 the grizzly bear will no longer exist in the Yellowstone Basin. Only 200 to 300 remain today, of which 30 or fewer are breeding females. And from those dwindling numbers several are killed each year.

The bear on the Yellowstone ridge is still charging, only 40 feet away now, chuffing hard. Does the hiker remember what the booklet advised, and what the ranger said? It could determine whether he leaves the scene with, as they say, all the parts intact.



Dangerous competition for a hooked salmon threatens the tranquility of this scene on Alaska's Brooks River. Fisherman John Craighead, a dean of grizzly research, knew enough about the huge bears to break his line and avoid a potentially

hazardous encounter. As visits to wilderness areas increase, people with less awareness about how bears, moose, deer, bison, and even birds often react to human intrusion could be courting injury and death. (Photo by Karen Haynam)

NOTICE OF SPECIAL MEETING

A special meeting will be conducted by the Warren County Board of Commissioners at 4:00 p.m., on April 30, 1986, at the Warren County Courthouse, Main Street, Warrenton, N.C. The purpose of this meeting will be to discuss land acquisition.

EVA M. CLAYTON, Chairperson
Warren County Board of Commissioners

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