

Grizzly encounter resolves in cloud of bear spray

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Sep 1, 2022

Missoulian on-line magazine



Scott Ferrenberg, left, and Alan Townsend had a close encounter with a male grizzly bear in the Ovando area.

TOM BAUER/Missoulian

A near-disaster became a testimonial for the effectiveness of bear spray when two University of Montana men met a real-life angry grizzly bear last weekend.

UM Forestry School Dean Alan Townsend and Lubrecht Experimental Forest Associate Director Scott Ferrenberg were doing some archery scouting on Sunday near Lake Upsata. The two men were working their way up from a pothole pond to a copse of trees around lunchtime when the worst six seconds of their lives popped out of the brush.

“We were making complacency mistakes,” Townsend said. “Both of us are very experienced in the outdoors doing this kind of thing. We were walking quietly along game trails, looking for signs, and getting a little too cavalier in thinking the combination of midday sunshine and being down in the more open part of that country was lower risk.”

The men had seen a couple black bears, but assumed they were close enough to Highway 200 that bigger predators wouldn't be around.

“When the bear popped up, I was slightly upslope of Alan, forming a triangle off my right shoulder,” Ferrenberg said. “There was a loud growl and breaking limbs. I swiveled my head and my first response was — this is a grizzly bear, this is a game-changer.”

“I was about 25 or 30 feet behind,” Townsend said. “It took a step or two toward Scott in what might have been a bluff charge. Then it looked downhill at me and just came for me. That was a full-blown rush.”

Townsend had both a pistol and a can of bear spray with him, and a pair of binoculars around his neck. As the bear charged, Townsend said he got mentally tangled in which option to grab, and then physically tangled in the straps.

“I made the mistake of not having a clear plan in advance what my primary defense tools should be,” Townsend said. “Not having that front of mind, I reached across for the sidearm but found my arm blocked by the binoculars.

“By that point he was coming for me, and I needed to buy myself a couple seconds,” Townsend continued. “I turned and ran a few steps to a small grove of trees, hoping that might at least slow it down a bit. We all know you can’t run from a grizzly.”

Ferrenberg thinks the grizzly switched from bluffing to aggression the instant it realized it had two opponents rather than one. It pivoted toward Townsend, and Ferrenberg ran toward it with his bear spray unholstered. He was able to send a broadside blast of the irritating gas just ahead of the grizzly’s head. The spray contained a bright orange dye, so he could see the 6-foot cloud it made.

“It was really fascinating,” Ferrenberg said. “I had this idea that it (the grizzly) had committed its weight to a strong sideways turn. But when it met the spray, it almost did a 180 — just up and spun out of there in an instant. After seeing it do those gymnastics, I realized that weight idea was really silly.”

Ferrenberg was well-versed in past reports of grizzlies continuing to attack even when hit by multiple bullets.

“It was such a profound reaction, for an animal that can endure great pain,” Ferrenberg said. “It wasn’t that its eyes were burning. I think it

knew the scenario had changed. The bear never wanted this encounter. It just wanted a way out of there and it saw an escape route.”

He also had a long familiarity with firearms, having a father and grandfather with military experience.

“I know the ability to be accurate when the adrenaline is pumping is something only special operators train for,” Ferrenberg said. “People think if they get good on paper targets, the firearm will work. But even with years of experience, I wouldn’t have been able to help Alan in that scenario. I would have had to fire in his direction. If he’s being mauled, what am I going to do? Shoot him and the bear? I was struck by how much in control I was with the pepper spray.”

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Region 2 Bear Manager Jamie Jonkel said the incident resolved as well as anyone could have hoped for.

“When I’m in the woods, I carry both spray and a sidearm,” Jonkel said. “But the go-to is spray first.”

Jonkel suspects the grizzly might have been a sow with a cub to protect, but can’t be certain. He does know the foothills of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex north of Highway 200 have at least three family groups of grizzly sows and cubs in the Ovando area, along with multiple lone grizzlies. Helmville and the Clearwater Junction vicinities have equal numbers of families and solo grizzlies.

That’s an issue for anyone scouting in anticipation of Montana’s big-game archery backcountry season, which starts Sunday Sept. 4, or general archery on Sept. 15. Jonkel said the hot, dry August has affected many bear food sources.

“Hunters are going to see more bear activity in the hidey-hole pockets where the bull elk hang out, because that’s where the coolness and berries and natural bear foods are. The berry crop isn’t the greatest this year, but it’s still OK.

“As a result, we will have a lot of bears concentrated,” Jonkel said. “If you find a huckleberry patch in the high cirques where the elk are bugling, you might be dealing with twice the number of grizzlies as normal. In the low elevations, they’re going to be in riparian sites and ag fields that are heavily watered.”

Both Townsend and Ferrenberg were amazed at the size of the grizzly.

“I’m 6-foot-4,” Ferrenberg said. “That bear’s snout standing on four feet would be around my sternum.”

“You have all these things that run through your head, thinking this is not good — damn that’s a magnificent animal,” Townsend said. “It was an absolutely beautiful bear.”