

Safety in BEAR COUNTRY

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You can't protect your livestock if you are dead. This concept is not new and dates back to the days of the first domesticated cow. Of course 10,000 years ago you didn't just have to worry about the occasional black bear or grizzly sneaking up behind you while out wrangling your lamas or steppe horses. You also had to be cognizant of the 2000 pound short-faced bear, or the hefty American cave lion weighing in at over 900 pounds. Dire wolves too were no slouches and were more than triple the size of our modern day lightweights. I doubt that our early North American predecessors took the threat of human wildlife attacks lightly ... and neither should we.

Government population estimates in BC, for black bears, indicate that populations are stable with numbers between 120,000 and 160,000. Debate around grizzly bear numbers are more heated with anecdotal observations conflicting somewhat with official estimates. The recent Draft British Columbia Grizzly Bear Stewardship Framework Document cautiously approaches the topic by saying "There is evidence of range expansion in the far north and towards the fringes of their distribution in the south and west in coastal B.C. There is no evidence of a decline in the overall population during the past 30 years, though most populations lack adequate abundance data to detect changes in population trend." That's as good as it gets. In April of 2020 the government produced its Grizzly Bear Population Estimate for 2018 document. The numbers presented indicate a consistent drop in grizzly bear numbers from an estimated high in 2004 of 17,000 to 16,000 in 2008, 15,000 in 2012 and about the same for 2018. In fairness the document recognises that there may not actually be a decline in numbers since 2004 but rather a change in methodology resulting in the difference.

Regardless of what the official

word is, the opportunity for encounters with both black and grizzly bears cannot be ignored. Alberta, with a grizzly bear population estimate at roughly 6% of that of British Columbia's and a black bear population of one quarter and its smaller human population has had four fatal grizzly attacks, all in the past three years, while BC has had none. Of course, a large portion of BC's human population is crammed into a very small corner of the province but regardless, are we overdue for a serious bear encounter? And do ranchers fit into a high risk category of outdoor users? I believe the answer to both questions is a definite yes! In the last five years the Livestock Protection Program has documented 284 livestock/bear conflicts. Approximately a dozen annually are with grizzly bears. This number is actually quite higher as a lot of bear conflicts on ranches and rangeland are directed straight to the Conservation Officer Service. Checking our cattle and looking for missing stock puts us in harm's way more often than we likely know. Ranchers have had a lot of close calls with aggressive bears. Moving and checking cattle, fencing and feeding are all activities that might expose us to bear encounters but without a doubt the riskiest activity most ranchers find themselves

involved in is that of searching for dead or missing cattle. With compensation being contingent on early discovery, and thus finding a verifiable kill, there is substantial incentive for us to follow up on that nasty smell or to check out why all those ravens are squawking down in the gully.

In the past I have taught many courses on safety in bear country. Over the years my courses sort of morphed into Dangerous Wildlife Protection Courses and took in wolves, cougars, coyotes, moose and bison. My years of backcountry travel as a park ranger and conservation officer in both Alberta and BC and some dangerous wildlife monitoring in the Yukon and NWT have given me knowledge and experiences to draw from. My wife and I have both had our fair share of interesting encounters over the years while rambling around, both individually and while travelling together. Luck only runs so far and ours I'm sure is pretty much used up. Anticipating encounters and being well prepared now seem like a more favourable strategy.

Being prepared for a bear encounter has two components; mental and physical. Mental preparation is a little more complicated and is too often overlooked. Mental preparation involves

having some of knowledge of bear behaviour, particularly how it relates to aggression, and how that knowledge will manifest in an appropriate response to that aggression. Understanding aggressive bear behaviour is very complex and I am cautious about not generalizing without going into more detail, for which the length of this column does not allow. Volumes have been written on the subject but the basic premise is that most encounters that humans have with aggressive bears can be summed up as defensive or predatory. Understanding the difference between the two and responding accordingly when confronted will put the odds of telling the story later, in your favour.

Defensive aggression is when a bear is sending you the message that you are not welcome in that particular space at that particular time. It may simply be that you are too close and you have infringed upon its own individual space (highly variable among individuals). It may also be a case of a female bear seeing you as a threat to her cubs. An often more dangerous situation is when a bear is defending a food source and as a rancher, that might just be the cow you are missing. Generally, black bears are more tolerant of these close encounter infringements. They want to be close to humans no more than we want to be close to them and their response is generally to retreat. Even black bear sows with cubs will most often flee or put her cubs up a tree where she may stand guard or join them. Black bears have learned that there are tougher critters out there and that any physical contact may result in injuries to them and in the case of a sow with cubs, such injuries may impact their ability to raise them.

Close encounter defensive reaction by grizzly bears are quite different however. In most cases a grizzly bear sees you as a threat and their reactionary response is to test that threat and remove it if necessary. Unlike black bears,

grizzly bear's dominance on the landscape has evolved since the end of the Pleistocene Epoch to be relatively unchallenged, except by other grizzly bears. A battle between two grizzly bears can get messy and although they do occur, grizzly bears often prefer to settle their disputes through intimidation rather than by risking bodily harm. A lot of bluffing, posturing and vocalization can occur. This same behavioral mode is often used when confronted by people. Depending on one's proximity to the bear, what the bear is defending and a person's initial reaction, the severity of the message can vary substantially. Bluff charging is a common response and is often characterized by a rapid approach pulling up short before contact is made. The bear will dog track a bit thus exposing more of its body profile during the charge which will give it the appearance of having a larger stature. Its front legs will flail out to the sides and its cheek jowls may puff out as it huffs or roars. Its approach is often stiff legged with a bit of a bounce. The image is very intimidating and certainly serves its purpose of giving the bear a significant presence. Often this quick aggressive response to an intrusion is repeated several time until the bear is content that the message has been given and received and any threat has been reduced. But not always does the charge halt before contact is made. Sometimes with these sudden defensive aggressive charges, a brief rototilling is administered, or the bear may continue to maul until movement ceases and the bear is content that the threat has been neutralized. In this case playing dead may put the odds in one's favour.

Predatory attacks on humans by bears are not common and even less so, statistically speaking, for grizzly bears than they are for black bears. Quite simply put, with predatory encounters the bear sees you as food and wants to eat you. Survival of a predatory attack is dependent upon



Predator Loss Verification Training – Livestock Prevention Program

In late February, a verification training session was held in Princeton. The training took place at the Princeton and District Community Skill Center and was hosted by the Princeton Stock Breeders Association and the BC Cattlemen's Association. Although 40 attendees registered there were several last minute cancellations due to a late winter storm in the area. The 33 participants were a varied group with cattle and sheep producers as well as several trappers, Ministry of Forests Range Officers and Conservation Officers. Those that did attend traveled from as far away as Prince George, McBride and Vancouver Island. After the verification training session LPP Program Coordinator Cam Hill ran eight new Wildlife Specialists through an orientation program.



This large male black bear showed no fear and trailed the author for over 20 minutes, at times approaching to within meters. This behaviour is common among predatory black bears and has been observed on livestock as well. The bear is sizing up its potential prey and watching for a moment of vulnerability. In this case the author was able to gain some elevation up a steep bank and the bear lost interest.

your use of a defence option or escape. Playing dead only works in the bear's favour. Predatory advances by either species of bear often have the same characteristics although black bears may take more time to carefully access their potential prey. They may approach or follow in a nonchalant almost disinterested manner and wait for a moment of vulnerability. In this case putting distance between you and the bear or working your way back to a safe location is the best advice. Some predacious attacks by black bears and those rare incidences with grizzlies are more direct. They will approach silently and with purpose. Often their body profiles are lower to the ground and may move in much like a cat stalking a mouse. This is a situation you don't want to find yourself in and if escape isn't possible, then fighting back is your only option.

Another predatory advance tactic used by both black and grizzly bears is the rush and scatter technique. This approach is more common in open ground and is often initiated at a substantial distance. A bear may recognise its target across a meadow or open hill side as a small herd or group of prey animals. Its approach is rapid and in plain view with the intent to scatter and pick off the unfortunate slow poke in the group. This technique is more common in the spring when fawns and calves are traveling with adults and has even been observed on mountain sheep and goats. In 2012 my wife and I were recipients of a firsthand lesson in this tactic while hiking with our than four-month old blue heeler pup Hank. We had just put the dog on a leash as we were concerned at the amount of bear sign we were seeing. Hank wasn't happy about that and did a bit of whining. Across a semi open hillside, we spotted a large brown coloured black bear about 300 meters away. The bear obviously picked up on the high pitched whine and likely saw us as a small herd of prey animals. We observed him go into stalk mode as he worked his way towards us. When he crossed into a ravine he turned up hill and went out of sight. He then gained some elevation until he was at the same level as us and at about 120 meters he blew out of the gully in a full charge. We were caught flat footed out on the open hill side. When I realized his intentions I yelled hoping he would identify us as human but at that point he was committed and his rapid pace didn't falter. It's amazing how quickly they can cover 120 meters! The year before we hiked that same remote hillside carrying only bear pepper spray. This time we carried rifles and at about 20 meters I ended his charge. Gary Shelton, author of three books on bear attacks and how to survive them, preached a 25 yard rule. At 25 yards, if armed, you need to be preparing to pull the trigger. My experience is that, even at that distance, there is no room for error. In my mind's eye I can still clearly see the vision, through my scope, which consisted of a brown mass with a nose and a long strings of saliva trailing out both sides of the mouth. Likely based on past successes with this technique, that old bear was obviously anticipating a meal. The area we were in was just above some small lakes and beaver ponds, favoured by late spring moose with fresh calves. With his poor eye sight, he would have identified us as a small group of moose or maybe deer and the sound of Hank's whining may have triggered the attack. If we had no defence option, his efforts would have been rewarded.

And that leads into the need to be physically prepared. For years the bear experts have given the advice to play dead with defensive



This large old male black bear charged the author, his wife and dog from approximately 120 meters. This behaviour is clearly predatory and is generally an open ground strategy with the intention to scatter a group of prey animals and pick off the slowest.

attacks and fight back during predatory attacks. If the reason for the attack cannot be identified, then the best advice is to gamble with the odds and play dead if attacked by a grizzly and fight back if attacked by a black bear. It should be noted that sometimes defensive attacks will turn predatory after contact has been made so playing dead is always a gamble. I am not much for gambling. I cannot stress enough that the only logical response to bear aggression is to have and be competent with some type of defence option. My first grizzly bear mauling investigation as a Conservation Officer involved a hunter who, while being mauled, killed a grizzly sow with his knife. His rifle was knocked from his hands and he fought for his life deploying his belt knife. It worked for him but the results were not pretty. Firearms or bear spray are your best choices. What you choose should not only be contingent on what you are most competent with but also the anticipated level of risk. If I am heading into an area to do a livestock verification, I will always carry a firearm. Whether bears have killed it or not is irrelevant as they may simply be drawn in by the smell of the carcass. If I am out fencing or just checking on pasture cattle, I generally find that carrying a rifle or shotgun is too cumbersome. Often it is left on the ATV or in the saddle scabbard or leaning against a tree where it is of little use. I find that packing a canister of bear spray on my belt is much more convenient. Nearly always, I will have one or the other on my person! For many rough and tumble rancher types, a firearm will seem like the only option. They are reliable only in the hands of a competent user and a wounded bear can only create additional problems. Again, as with grizzly bears in particular, a high percentage may be bluff charges where bears are shot needlessly. Plus, killing a bear brings on a significant amount of legal baggage. Unless, as was the case of the charging black bear I previously mentioned, you have a bear species tag and the season is open, the killing or wounding of a bear must be reported as soon as possible to the Conservation Officer Service. In most cases they will do a follow up investigation to ensure that the right choices were made both during and after the incident.

Bear spray does have its limitations but the success of its use is well documented. Bear spray needs to be carried where it is readily accessible and as with firearms, the user must be familiar and competent in its use. Courses on bear spray use are now being offered and there are plenty of good YouTube videos out there.

For the majority of British Columbians, the risk of experiencing a bear attack is minimal to non-existent. That risk goes up exponentially for those of us who spend time in bear country and it goes up even higher, much higher, for hunters and ranchers who might find themselves dealing with animal carcasses or other attractants. Having an encounter with an aggressive bear can be terrifying and for many people, even just the possibility, can limit their ability to enjoy the outdoors. Being prepared can heighten your comfort level.



Conservation Officers will attend incidents where grizzly bears are killed to protect life or property to ensure that the correct decisions were made at the time and after the incident. This grizzly bear stalked the author and his wife in a predatory manner and was shot mere feet away when it was approaching quickly and silently from behind. Situational awareness and being prevented may have prevented a tragic outcome.



Bear Spray – Saving bears and people since 1985.

Further information about the Livestock Protection Program can be found at www.cattlemen.bc.ca/lpp.htm
For incidents of cattle or sheep losses, injury or harassment where wolves, coyotes or birds are suspected please call our toll free number 1-844-852-5788.

For incidents involving other wildlife such as bear and cougar please contact the COS RAPP line at 1-877-952-7277.