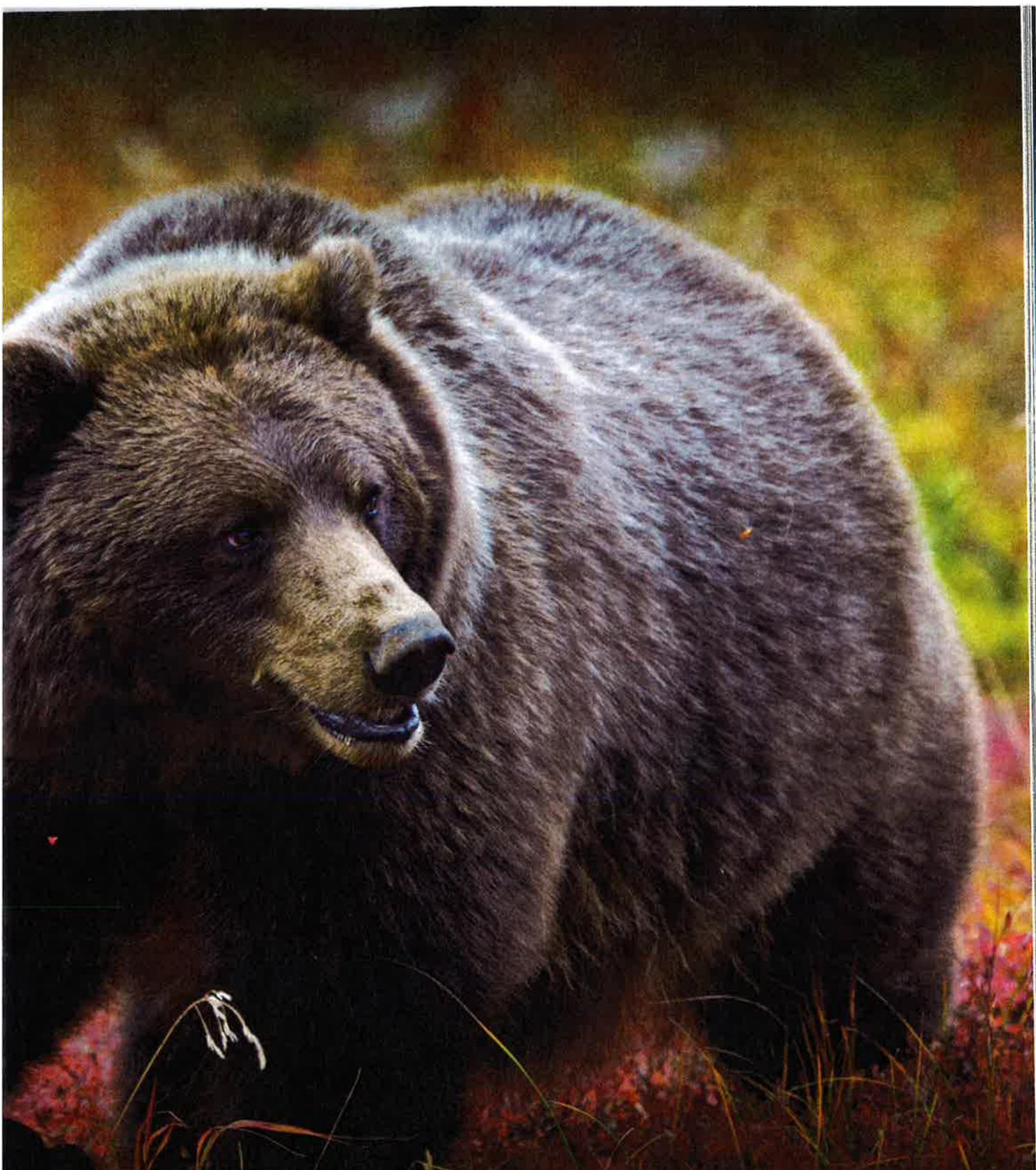


GRIZZLY SITUATIONS

THE TYPICAL BEAR ADVICE
GIVEN TO HIKERS DOESN'T WORK
FOR HUNTERS. HERE'S WHAT YOU
REALLY NEED TO KNOW WHEN
HUNTING IN GRIZZLY COUNTRY.

BY ANTHONY ACERRANO



The grizzly had its head down, sniffing and rooting its way up the grassy slope, maybe fifty yards from where I hunkered behind a scanty clump of brush. This, to put it mildly, was a disappointing turn of events. I had been hoping the bulky animal, when its motion first caught my eye, was an elk, because that was what I was hunting in this wild country northwest of Yellowstone. But worse news was only moments away.

Two smallish brown shapes appeared, bobbing and moving around the bigger bear. This was not a lone grizzly, which would have been bad enough; it was a sow with cubs, one of the most potentially dangerous bears you can run into. My stomach clenched and I muttered a soft but vehement curse. A grizzly sow and two cubs were heading right for me. To worsen the problem, this was a mostly open slope, and there was nowhere else to hide nor any chance to make a concealed get-

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away. She wasn't going to catch my scent and flee at the dread smell of human, because hunters with any sense don't position themselves with the wind at their backs. If I tried to retreat up the slope quietly, she would see me; if I stood and "alerted the bear of my presence," by calling out and waving my arms—as some bear-safety guidelines advise—I could very well trigger an attack. At this range, I was easily in the sow's critical-distance zone, where her first and immediate response to hearing or seeing an intruder might be to attack to protect her cubs. So what was I supposed to do?

Welcome to the real world of hunters and grizzlies. This is not the world generally described in bear-safety literature, where you should travel in groups of four, make plenty of noise, adorn yourself with a tinkling set of bear bells, stay upwind of prime bear habitat, stay off of game trails, avoid moving about at dusk and dawn, keep out of thick cover, and "play dead" if you're charged. The fact is, when you're a big-game hunter in grizzly country, you are operating within a different set of realities, and a lot of the standard or official "bear rules" (many of them dubious or over-generalized in the first place, as we'll see) either don't apply or need to be seriously revised.

Recently I contacted a few of my longtime bear-mentor friends, biologists who have spent decades working and interacting with grizzlies in the northern Rockies, Alaska, and the Yukon; guys who, combined, have had thousands of encounters with bears. I promised them anonymity if they would answer some tough questions, say what they really thought, and con-

firm, contradict, or add to my own conclusions on the subject of hunter-grizzly realities. Fortunately, they agreed. What follows are some of the myths and misconceptions we addressed, and some strategies for specific situations every big-game hunter should know about before venturing into griz country.

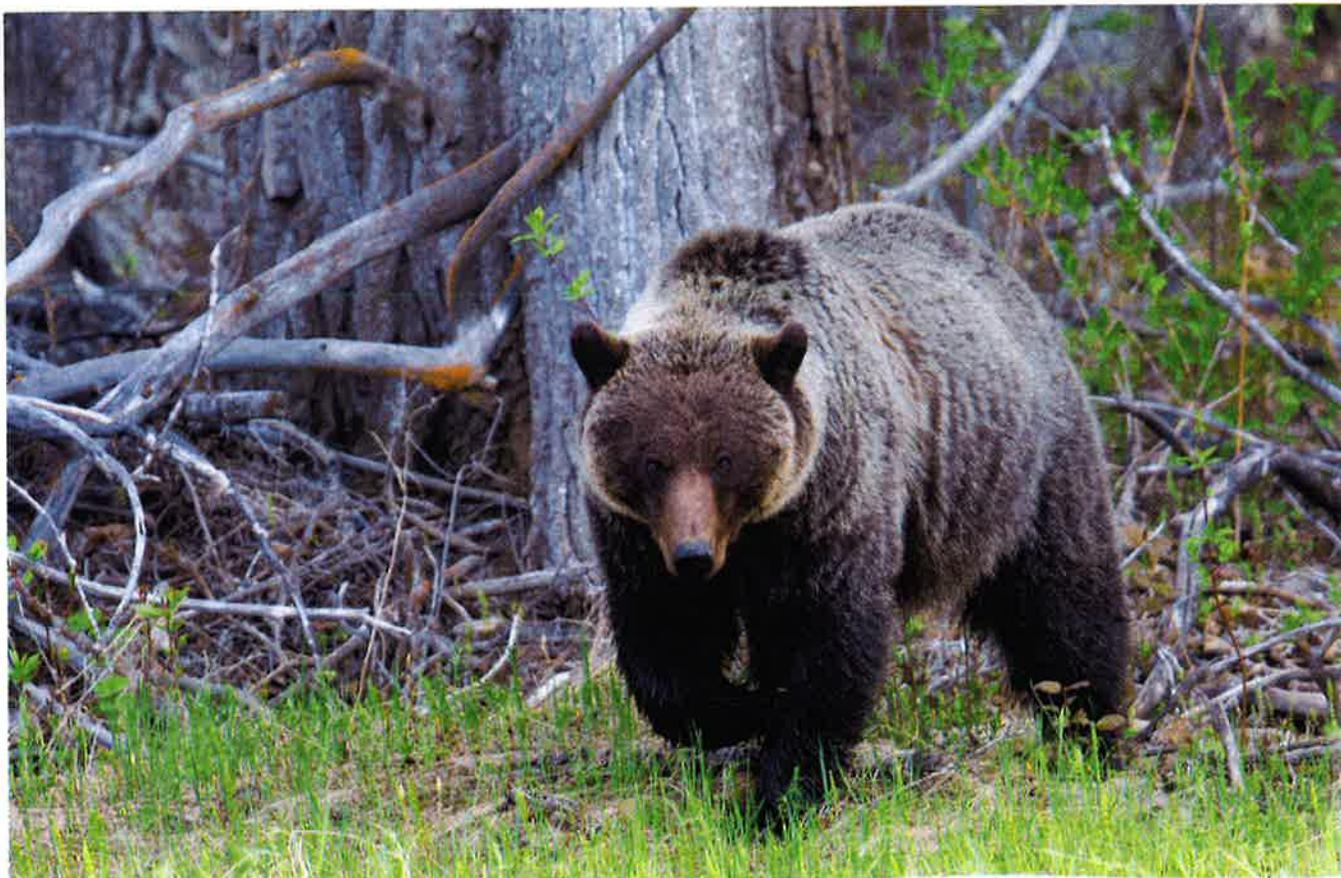
Bear Rules?

"Sometimes," said the most experienced and knowledgeable of my expert advisors, "I think the people who know the least spout off the most when it comes to absolute bear rules."

This is a biologist who has spent more than forty years working intensively with bears, and who has taught and lectured on bear safety throughout North America.

"People want me to tell them something like, 'Jump up and down on your left leg and cluck like a chicken' so they can think, *OK, this is what you're supposed to do when you meet a bear.* But it doesn't work that way. It's not cut-and-dried. What's important is to have some understanding of what the bear is doing, and why, what its probable motivations are, and then respond according to that particular situation."

A vital key here is understanding the difference between "defensive" and "nondefensive" bears and bear encounters. In a defensive encounter, the bear is threatened and stressed by your presence. As one of my first and great bear mentors, Charles Jonkel, used to say, "Bears defend three things: their personal space, their young, and in some cases, their food." So if you get too close to a grizzly, or



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You need to have some understanding of what a bear is doing, and why, before you decide how to react.

one is surprised as it bumps into you, that bear might become defensively aggressive. A sow with cubs is potentially very dangerous, because nature knows few fiercer creatures than a grizzly mother protecting her young. A bear that is feeding on or defending an animal carcass might also get aggressive if a person comes too close. More often than not, when a grizzly charges or attacks a hunter, it is a defensive bear responding to a perceived threat.

Nondefensive bears and bear encounters involve an animal that is not feeling threatened or stressed, but deliberately approaches a person or a camp. This kind of bear could be merely curious, habituated to humans (and therefore largely unafraid of them), food-conditioned (and therefore looking for something to eat, such as camp garbage or a downed game animal), asserting dominance, or coming in as a predator seeking human prey.

The ways you should deal with a defensive bear can be vitally different from the ways you respond to a nondefensive one.

"In general, with a defensive bear that's acting upset," the same biologist advises, "you're trying to convey, 'Don't worry about me, I'm not a danger.' With a nondefensive bear, you're trying to convey, 'Don't mess with me.' There can be some overlap in the ways you respond, but that is a fundamental difference."

Let's see how all of this applies to some commonly accepted "Bear Rules."

Rule: "If you encounter a grizzly, stand your ground." This is a good guideline in most situations, but it's not ironclad. The sound principle here is that if you stand still, don't run or stumble backward or start yelling and waving your arms or try to

scramble up a tree, at the very least you won't make the situation worse. More than one biologist believes that an important and underestimated factor in having bear spray ready, or even a drawn handgun (as long as it's not fired too soon or unnecessarily), is that it gives you a posture of confidence, of not being intimidated. At the same time, you're not being aggressively assertive in a way that might threaten a defensive bear and increase the likelihood of an attack.

"In a lot of cases, if you just stand your ground and do very little, looking confident, it's disconcerting to the bears," says one biologist, "And usually they move on."

He adds, "Don't necessarily interpret a bear encounter as a situation for panic or fear of impending death. It's very important to remember that most bear encounters resolve peacefully. Don't freak out. Excessive fear and near or all-out panic can get you into trouble in a lot of situations where if you're just reasonable and calm, and maybe talk to the bear, you're fine."

When there's time for it, talking calmly to a suddenly-met grizzly—rather than yelling and violently waving your arms—can be an effective strategy. Chuck Jonkel advised saying something sensible and true like, "It's OK, bear. I'm not here to hurt you," because bears are ultra-sensitive to body language, and your body will convey (in ways you won't even realize) the message of what you're saying. You might also find that talking to a bear during a sudden encounter also calms you. Your soothing words have a reflexive effect, keeping your own latent fear in check.

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An often-repeated corollary to the “stand your ground” rule is “Don’t back away from a bear.” But that’s not always right.

“Don’t back away from a bear that’s approaching you,” one advisor says. “If you back away, that encourages it to move forward. But with a bear that isn’t approaching, or a bear that’s acting agitated but not closing in, backing away can be a perfectly fine idea. If you take a few careful steps back, opening the gap between you and the bear, and the bear doesn’t close in or appears less stressed, that’s good.”

What about the Bear Rule, “Never look a grizzly in the eye?”

“When grizzlies interact with each other, a direct stare is perceived as being more aggressive than an indirect look or averted gaze,” explains one biologist. “So if you’re dealing with a defensive bear that’s acting upset, and you’re trying to let it know you’re not a danger, then keep an eye on the bear, but do it in a way that’s non-aggressive, averting your gaze a bit or looking from the corner of your eyes.

“If, on the other hand, a four-year-old subadult bear is trying to act tough, test-charging, hopping at me, I want to be assertive with that bear, intimidating, and I *would* look him in the eye. But if you come around a bend and there’s a sow with cubs at close range, you don’t want to act assertive. You look at it from the corner of your eyes, talk to it in a calm voice, saying something like, ‘It’s OK, don’t worry about me, I’m all right.’”

What about climbing trees? Some say don’t try it; others say if you can scuttle up a tree, do so.

“I’m not that big on tree-climbing,” says one advisor. “People fixate on that and then when they see a bear, they start scrambling for the nearest tree, which can and has provoked chase behavior from the bears.”

A common belief is that adult grizzlies can’t climb trees, because of their comparatively straight front claws and their bulk. But there are many case histories of grizzlies going up trees after people, as high as eighteen feet, and hauling them down for a sometimes fatal mauling. Also, when standing, some adult

bears can reach ten feet or higher to rake at or pull down a climbing human.

One Bear Rule that is pretty golden is “Never run from a grizzly.” (Or, I might add, from any predatory animal that’s faster than you are.) The sole exception is if a short, fast dash will take you truly to safety from the bear’s possible assault. If you’re a few yards from a cabin door, for example, or some other refuge the bear can’t penetrate. Otherwise, memorize the simple words: *Never run from a bear.* Running is bad. Very, very bad.

Grizzly Situations

Now let’s look at some specific types of encounters you might have to deal with while hunting.

Situation: A bear that hasn’t seen you is moving in your direction.

Remember me up on the open slope northwest of Yellowstone with a sow and cubs only fifty yards off, aiming my way? She won’t smell me and move off because a steady cross-breeze is blowing my scent off to the right. If I stay hunkered behind



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the patch of scrub, she'll only get closer, and the closer she gets, the more dangerous the situation becomes. If there were a tree line nearby, or if I were at the edge of thicker cover, I could carefully and quietly ease my way back in, staying out of sight, then move off quickly to get distance from the bear. Also, if feasible, I would move to an upwind position so she would catch my scent and take off in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately, I had none of those options. I had to let her see me as soon as possible. But I wasn't going to stand up and start yelling and waving my arms. That would make me seem more of a threat to a defensive bear. I unholstered my can of bear spray and held it in my left hand, and shouldered my rifle with my right hand. I decided I would stand and start talking just loud enough for her to hear. If she charged when she saw me, she could close the gap in three seconds or less. I'd hit her with spray when she was thirty feet out and then shoot if she didn't halt or veer off from the charge.

I was getting ready to rise and show myself when I saw the sow getting edgy, acting nervous. She lifted her head, did a quick side-scuffle and stood, raising her nose to the wind. Then she dropped and hustled her cubs across the grassy slope, moving away to my right. I let out a long breath and waited until the trio was out of sight. Then I did a lot more steady breathing. A while later, I saw a pair of blaze-orange specks below me and off to the left. Fellow hunters, whose scent she must have picked up while they were still a quarter-mile off. So that time I was lucky.

Situation: A grizzly does see you, and keeps on coming. Not charging, but coming in steadily, focused on you. What do you do?



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Never run from a bear. You will only make the situation worse.

THE LORDS OF LONG RANGE.

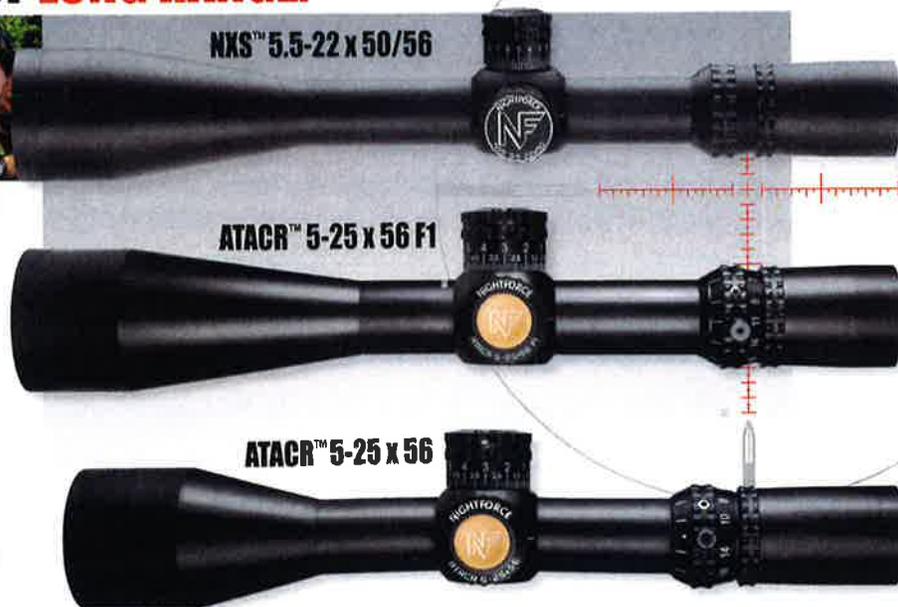


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"If I'm on a travel route, like a trail," says one biologist, "the bear might just want to get by. I'll give it the right-of-way; move off the trail. The bear might just walk on by. But if I move and the bear changes its course toward me, then I know it's keyed in on me. Then I'll change to 'don't mess with me' mode. That doesn't mean yelling and waving my arms violently. I try to use the minimum amount of assertiveness. But if the bear gets pushy or aggressive, I up the game: stand my ground, act confident, look it in the eyes, talk in a firm voice. With a bear walking toward you, you usually have time to prepare your weapon or deterrent. I tell people to pick out a spot maybe twenty or thirty feet away, a shrub or rock, say, and if the bear crosses that line, use your spray or gun to defend yourself."

Situation: A grizzly charges. The bear is running at you, or moving forward with obvious aggression.

Note that this is not yet an attack. An attack occurs if and when the bear actually makes contact—an important distinction, because most charging bears

do not actually make contact, especially if the person involved avoids doing the things that make an attack more likely (running, screaming, violently waving their arms, or playing dead too soon, for example). Some charges happen flash-fast and all-out, and there is barely time to react. Some charges are more hesitant, dodgy, stop and go. I'll let my number-one bear mentor give the advice here:

"If a grizzly comes immediately at you, without stopping or bouncing or hesitating, that could be an attack. But if it does any bobbing and stopping, if there's any hesitation at all, to me that says the bear hasn't decided what it wants to do. Then your behavior really makes a difference.

"Bears that are dominance-charging, or testing, hop around, come in, stop, maybe hop again. Their head and ears are up. In most cases, this kind of bear doesn't need to be shot. Yet most people in that situation would swear they were being attacked and had to shoot. But if the person simply stood still, stayed calm, maybe talked to the bear but didn't over-react, the bear would eventually move

off. This is also where spray is a great option, because it can end the confrontation quickly without anyone getting hurt.

"It's the bear that's coming in head down, ears back, coming in like a freight train, no hesitation, that's probably the bear that's really going to attack. Though even that kind of bear will sometimes stop or veer off at the last second, without making contact."

However, with a grizzly like that, don't wait to the last second to defend yourself. Thirty feet away or closer, you shoot, whether with spray or gun.

With spray, be sure to aim low enough to hit the bear in the face with the pepper cloud. It's easy to shoot too high on an in-rushing grizzly with its head down. You want the bulk of the spray in the animal's nose, eyes, and mouth, not on its back.

Where to aim with a gun? You'll hear talk about "breaking the bear down" with a shoulder shot, going for a heart shot, and so on, but on a fast-charging grizzly, that's too fanciful.

"You're aiming or pointing center mass," one expert says, speaking from

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experience. “Realistically, that’s what you have. The bear’s a blob, coming at you. Aim at the center of it. I think that’s the best you can do.”

Even if your shot isn’t lethal, he adds, it’s usually enough to turn a charging bear away. “The impact and flash of pain will usually make a bear swerve and get out of there. Your shot doesn’t have to be perfect to save your life.”

Situation: A grizzly attacks.

This is when the bear actually makes contact. Maybe you never got your deterrent into play, or maybe you shot and missed, or for whatever reason the spray or bullet didn’t work, and now the bear is on you.

Should you play dead? If you are still armed and able to shoot, whether with bullets or the rest of your spray, keep trying to defend yourself. Otherwise, with a defensive grizzly such as a sow protecting her cubs, or a bear you surprised at close range, you should play dead just as it makes contact. Fall to the ground and lie on your stomach with your legs slightly spread apart and your hands locked behind your head and upper neck.

This protects your face, neck, and skull, which are typical defensive-bear targets. If the bear flips you over, continue rolling until your stomach, vital organs, and face are again protected by the ground. Don’t fight back, struggle, or cry out; any of which might encourage the bear to continue its attack. Defensive bears usually stop mauling once they no longer perceive the person as a threat. When the bear stops, don’t move or lift your head—that can reignite the attack—stay still for the eternity it will seem like and wait until the bear leaves the area.

Nondefensive attacks by grizzlies are uncommon, but they do happen. This, again, is a bear that is not threatened by you, that is seeking you out intentionally, perhaps breaking into your tent or entering your camp, or coming at you while you’re field-dressing a downed game animal. You need to convince the bear that you are not going to be easy prey. If attacked by this kind of grizzly, do *not* play dead. Fight back with all you’ve got. Yell, kick, punch, gouge, trying for the eyes, face, and nose; use

whatever weapons you can get a hand on, a knife, rock, stick, binocular, camp gear. It’s a fight for your life.

In Grizzly Country

The world is a different, wilder place when grizzlies are on the landscape. As biologist and writer Doug Chadwick puts it, “Where grizzlies endure, you are part of the ecosystem, whether you believe you are or not. You are in nature, the way people used to be.”

When hunting in grizzly country, you need to stay awake and alert, looking for and heeding any evidence that bears are nearby. Tracks, scats, tree rubs, diggings, torn-apart logs, compressed-vegetation day-beds, covered-up carrion, for example. But, as one advisor warns: “Here’s the real Bear Rule to remember: If you’re in griz country, just assume the bears are around, even if you don’t see any sign. Proceed, without unnecessary fear, as though you expect to encounter a grizzly sooner or later. Then act accordingly.” 



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