

BEARLY SAFE

BY KRISTEN POPE

Local Encounters and Best Practices

LAST JUNE, EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD Eli Hagberg was hiking alone on Teton Valley's popular Aspen Trail when he encountered a large black bear. Apparently startled, the bear charged. In an attempt to get away, Hagberg scrambled into a tree and the bear followed, tearing off the young man's shoes and biting his feet and lower legs. The bear then fell out of the tree, but took along the branch supporting Hagberg's feet, leaving him hanging from another small branch, which soon broke. Hagberg fell some twenty feet to the ground. Both stunned, Hagberg and the bear had a brief stare-down before the bruin took off. Unable to walk due to his injuries, Hagberg crawled more than two miles down the single track before being discovered by an ATV rider and taken to the hospital.

Hagberg's terrifying experience was not the only serious run-in between bears and local residents in recent years, and such encounters are definitely no longer the exclusive domain of the deep wilderness or national parks. Mountain biker Sean Doherty, who has explored local trails for many years without see-

ing a bear, reported that in 2012, for the first time ever, he saw two black bears at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and a grizzly on Teton Pass, although neither displayed aggressive behavior. Doherty now carries bear spray and makes a lot of noise on his rides. "My biggest concern is if I encounter a bear on the way down around blind corners," Doherty said. "I wouldn't say I worry about them, but I definitely think about them."

As spring rolls around, local residents should expect to see more bears than ever. However, Gregg Losinski of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game emphasizes that bears are hardly new to the area. "Bears are recolonizing places their ancestors had been," Losinski said. "Depending on the location, grizzlies [have been] absent for fifteen to one hundred years. The bears are going back to where they have [historically] been, and we are there now."

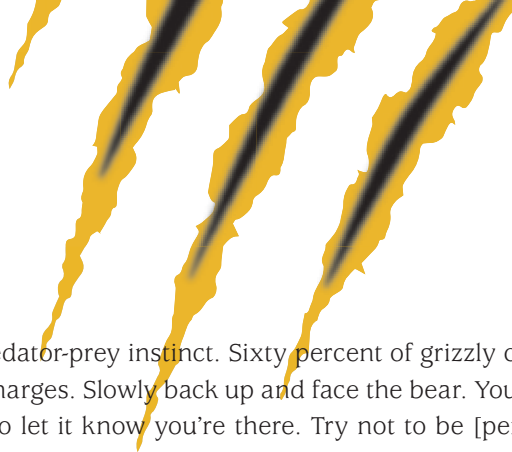
The search for food is the primary influence on bear movements. Upon emergence from the den in the spring, they explore lower elevations, drainage bottoms, avalanche chutes, and ungulate winter ranges to meet their food requirements. In the late spring and early summer, they return to higher elevations as the snow melts. In late summer and fall, there is a transition to fruit and pine nut sources, as well as to herbaceous materials. Keep in mind, though, that bears are simply trying to survive and will go where they best can meet their food requirements.

Adding to the challenge, a growing number of people are participating in activities with high potential for conflict. Mountain biking and trail running can cause problems because "you can literally run into bears," Losinski said. Hunting is also fraught with danger. "Hunters do everything wrong in bear country," Losinski added. "They sneak around, their scent covered by elk urine and natural smells, wearing camouflage. They end up surprising bears. Most problems happen when people surprise bears. Bears rarely go after humans like in the movies."

When encountering a bear, it is important not to panic. "Never run, period," Losinski said. "You don't want to trigger



"The bears are going back to where they have [historically] been, and we are there now."



the predator-prey instinct. Sixty percent of grizzly charges are bluff charges. Slowly back up and face the bear. You can make noise to let it know you're there. Try not to be [perceived as] a threat."

"If a bear is scoping you out and stands up, that is not an aggressive posture," Losinski said. "It is standing to see and smell you. But if it wags its head back and forth and slobbers or drools, barks or woofs, that means it doesn't like what it's seeing or smelling, and the bear is turning aggressive."

"If it is a grizzly and it gets startled and charges, before contact lie down and put your face down with your hands cupped behind your head and your legs apart. It's hard to flip a person over if they're spread out. Try to protect the soft front of your rib cage and literally play dead. Once contact occurs, keep lying down after the bear breaks off. Don't get up and run. Give them time to clear the area and move on. If they want you, they've got you. Your best bet is to stay put."



"Never run, period ... you don't want to trigger the predator-prey instinct."

Experts recommend bear spray in the field and caution against reliance on firearms for protection. "Bear spray for the most part works as long as you are able to get out a cloud the bear runs through," Losinski said. "You might get lucky with the right firearm if you're a good shot. You might hit the bear, but a kill shot is very unlikely. If it charges and is shot, then you have a wounded bear charging. If it was a bluff charge, you've turned a bluff charge into an aggressive charge. If you're reacting to a bear charge, there's a lot of adrenaline, and when the bear is jumping over logs at thirty-five miles per hour, your chances of getting a good shot are very slim."

One study on bear spray found that it stopped bear aggression 80 to 90 percent of the time, and left 98 percent of people uninjured and no bears killed. A similar study on firearms found that 56 percent of incidents involving firearms resulted in human injury and bears were killed in 61 percent of incidents.

Experts caution that bear spray is only one tool, and that people need to make prudent decisions in bear country. As grizzly bear researcher Dr. Stephen French says, "[Bear] spray isn't brains in a can." A charging bear can cover forty-

WHAT TO DO WITH THAT OLD BEAR SPRAY?

Thousands of bear spray canisters—used and unused—are disposed of in trash containers in the Greater Yellowstone region because they are not allowed on commercial flights and/or because visitors no longer need them. These bear spray canisters enter the waste stream, creating a serious environmental concern. In addition, waste disposal workers are exposed to accidental discharge of pepper-laced propellant at disposal sites.

A recycling solution came from three Montana State University engineering students, who designed a machine that removes the pepper oil and propellant before it crushes the canister. The recycling unit is able to extract all contents through a filtering process that safely separates the ingredients. The empty canisters are then punctured, flattened, and sold to any recycling center as high-quality aluminum. The recycling unit is now located at Mammoth in Yellowstone National Park.

Collection sites that send canisters to be recycled include all Grand Teton and Yellowstone park visitor centers and lodging facilities, the Jackson Hole Airport, and the Teton County Wyoming Recycling Center.



four feet in a single second, and on average it takes people from two to five seconds to deploy bear spray.

"Bear spray needs to be close and easy to get to," said Larry Hartenstein, general manager of Jackson Hole Sports in Teton Village. "We sell a bear spray holder [for bicycles] that mounts directly into the area where you would mount a cage for a water bottle. Some folks will ride with bear spray on their backpack chest strap or in a side pocket of their backpack." And remember, bear spray should only be used during an aggressive bear encounter, and not as a deterrent. When sprayed on tents, around campsites, and on other equipment, the spray can actually attract bears. 🐾



Kristen Pope is an environmental educator and writer living in Jackson. Her passions are hiking and exploring wild places.