

SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS

FALL 2007



Stories help prevent dangerous encounter with grizzly bear

By Tom Parker

I knew I was way too close to this big grizzly. It was early morning and I was hiking the Swan Range looking for black bears. In seconds flat, my brain went into heightened awareness where every part of my sensory and nervous system was “full on.” I ran through every bit of information I could glean from wind speed and direction, to all of the grizzly bear stories I’d been told by local mountain men who had spent their lives with these big bears. A single obscure detail from one of their rich stories, or a slight change in wind drift could mean everything to my safety.

This was nearly 30 years ago before the advent of bear spray. I had in my daypack, a canteen, lunch, camera and a .357 magnum revolver. I was guiding a bear hunter from Northeast Wyoming who worked in the coal mining industry. I had left him about a mile north looking for bear activity, while I hiked and scouted for fresh sign.

There was a heavy dew on the grass, and I was about to go back and join the hunter when movement downslope in a brush thicket caught my eye. I remember staring intently for some time wondering what a sheep was doing on this mountain. My mind flashed to the time Dob Wilhelm had told me about seeing a bighorn ram not far from where I was standing. But the color wasn’t right for a wild sheep. It was more domestic.

A few moments later, it became clear I was looking at a very large grizzly bear, now moving in my direction. The bear was nearly albino. It had no idea I was there. The air drift was steady and my scent molecules were being carried downslope at least 45 degrees to the north of him. I started

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DNA testing exonerates grizzly bears; Albino #191 avoids trap

By Liza Ward

Running with my dog on Falls Creek Road a few weeks ago, the skins of berries in old scat piles turned to dust beneath my sneakers. The bear had come and gone. Rounding an uphill bend, however, the tall grass and the gold leaves of aspens took on

a threatening hue when a breeze came out of the east, carrying with it the reek of decay. Though I had most likely caught whiff of a kill, I like to think I had stumbled across one piece of a wide network of bear snags, a mix of fish juice and cattle blood the U.S. Geological Survey used in 2004-

2005 to draw bears to their barb wire snags, a non-invasive network of DNA capturing in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem.

When the U.S. Geological Survey began collecting DNA from grizzly bear rubbings, their intention was to monitor population trends. The news that at least 545 grizzly bears were roaming the 7 million acres east and west between Highway 93 and Highway 89, and north and south from the Canadian border to Highway 200, was encouraging. But other more recent rewards have come out of the project right here in the Swan, an unprecedented wildlife Crime Scene Investigation has opened the door for a whole new way of thinking about the project. What specialists never expected was that the hair and blood samples collected from 2,500 snags would serve as a kind of jury for bears who had been trapped or had left

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Northwest Connections photo

Large grizzly dies in bear/truck collision

In the early hours of Tuesday, October 9 a large male grizzly bear lost his life in an accident on Highway 83 near Grace's Greenhouse.

A pickup truck hit the dark colored bear, which was in the road. The driver contacted the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks office as soon as he reached phone service.

Grace Siloti heard the crash around 4:00 a.m. She went out to investigate after receiving several phone calls from people who had seen the dead bear.

Concerned that someone might steal his claws, Siloti guarded the grizzly until authorities could arrive. Several other residents stopped to help.

After getting permission from wildlife managers, Siloti started her Skid Steer, loaded the grizzly and moved him away from the road. Until then the body was clearly visible to passers by.

Kathy Koors, Swan Ecosystem Center, said, "What a shame! He was a gorgeous animal," agreeing with many others who had stopped to look.

The grizzly was wearing a GPS collar that was tracking his moves every hour. The bear had re-



Grace Siloti and Kathy Koors watching over the grizzly killed on Highway 83.

Melanie Parker photo.

cently been trapped in the Swan Valley by Tim Manley, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Manley has been setting traps in an attempt to capture Albino #191 (see Grizzly Exonerated, front page).

According to Manley, the bruin killed on the highway was 8-10 years old and had never been in trouble. He weighed about 450 pounds.

The grizzly bear will be mounted by a taxidermist and displayed for educational purposes at the Swan Ecosystem Center visitor center in the U.S. Forest Service Condon Work Center.

DNA, continued

DNA behind, and were suspected of being trouble makers.

It started in September with a series of cabin break-ins from Holland Lake to Kauffman Road. Bear specialist Tim Manley with Fish, Wildlife and Parks collected hair and blood samples from the cabins and matched them to a single bear in the database, Albino Bear #191, named after Albino Basin in the Bob Marshall Wilderness where he was trapped and released after his DNA was collected in 2004. In 2006, he was responsible for Forest Service cabin break-ins, but never caught. He was old and practically toothless then. Now he is believed to be about twenty. At the time of this writing, he has broken into no fewer than ten cabins in the Swan Valley, and has made the front page of the Missoulian. The search continues as fall begins to wane, and bears go deeper into hyperphagia.

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A few tips for hunters

Montana bow hunters and bears have had unfortunate run-ins this year, resulting in maulings and a grizzly's death. During rifle season, more people will be in the woods when bears need to fatten before denning. Hunters be aware:

- Bugling, antler rattling, game calls and cover scents attract predators, including bears. Have bear pepper spray ready.

- Ravens, eagles, jays and magpies gather at gut piles, as do bears. Avoid areas where birds congregate. Pay attention to fresh bear sign.

- A bear may claim your carcass before you return. Scan the area for signs of bears before approaching.

- Hunters can help each other. Share bear sightings, let your partners know where you are, and report encounters to MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

- Most bears won't charge. Back away and leave if you encounter a bear. Do not run.

- Bear pepper spray is the most effective deterrent for a charging bear. Be sure your pepper spray is functional and you know how to use it. Keep it warm in freezing weather—on your chest inside an unzipped vest is a warm place.

- If attacked lie face down and play dead with your hands and arms protecting your head and neck.

Tracking the Bear Ranger

By Mark Ruby

My goal as Swan Valley Bear Ranger is to reduce human-bear conflict around the valley. I deal with issues ranging from camping and living in bear country, to bear safety, and education. These issues have special importance here in the Swan Valley, where bears and humans must coexist.

Each week, I frequent both developed and dispersed camp sites around the valley, speaking to visitors about responsible camping. A large part of my message has to do with the Forest Service Food Storage Order on the Flathead, Lolo, Helena, and Lewis and Clark National Forests, which requires bear attractants such as coolers, garbage, and food to be stored in vehicles, campers, bear resistant boxes, or suspended ten feet up and four feet out from a hanging support.

I also work with homeowners to reduce attractants, including storing garbage in garages, using bear-resistant garbage containers (which can be borrowed or bought from Swan Ecosystem Center), suspending bird feeders between trees, and cleaning and storing outdoor grills. My goal is to provide help and incentive for responsible behavior in bear country.

Providing information is one of the most important components of my job. I spoke to several

adult groups this summer about the plight of grizzlies in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. I also took children on educational hikes where we practiced making noise and responding appropriately if a bear charges. We also studied bear skulls, tracks, rubbings, and scat. In early October, I spoke to students at both Swan Valley School and Bigfork High School. I believe that understanding fosters respect for bears. If we can help young people learn to peacefully coexist with bears, then we can prevent future problems.

Stories about bears raiding garbage cans, and breaking into cabins or garages have become all too common in recent years. An initial situation usually results in the trapping and release of the bear on site, but if the problem persists, repeat offenders are euthanized, lending validity to the adage: "A fed bear is a dead bear." In addition to human-bear food conflicts, poaching and misidentification also play a role in the mortality of grizzly and black bears in the Swan. My job is to work with the public to minimize bear conflicts and to encourage people to work together and find a suitable means of coexistence.

The Swan Valley Bear Ranger is a cooperative program among Swan Ecosystem Center; Flathead National Forest; Plum Creek Timber Company; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Defenders of Wildlife; Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee; Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Lake County; Living with Wildlife Foundation; Northwest Connections; and private donors.



Photos:

Top: Mark Rubey & Adam Lieberg at Swan Valley School. *Liza Ward*
 Middle: Mark Ruby with SEC's After School Club. *Paula Clarke*
 Bottom: "Role over and protect your stomach." *Paula Clarke*

Stories prevent bad encounter, continued

backing up because he was coming almost directly to me and I knew he wouldn't smell me until he was very close. I moved slowly, deliberately. If he caught sight of me, I knew he'd think I was moving in on him.

Whenever his head went behind a shrub or tree, I moved. When his head was exposed, I stopped. Several times he was well obscured and I made good progress. I got up beside a big tree on the edge of the meadow. Just then, the bear came into the meadow south of me. He was now feeding on grasses 25 or 30 yards to the east. As he approached the center of the small meadow, I could see the precise distance between the end of his nose and my own tracks in the dew-covered grass. Will he track me when he hits my scent, I wondered?

It was exactly like he'd walked into a pane of glass. He jolted to a stop, bristled up and stiffened. He looked right at me, but my outline was broken up by the tree. I barely breathed. He made a couple of stiff bounds uphill across the meadow, stopped, looked around once more, woofed, and took off like a freight train through the big timber upslope. I heard him breaking big wood some distance up the mountain.

If I had learned one thing from the stories of experienced mountain men, it was: "They don't want any more of you than you want of them." Given the circumstances of this chance encounter, I applied their wisdom to the best of my ability, and fortunately it worked out.

Nearly all the old time mountain men shared great admiration and respect for bears. Sure, the

odd nuisance bear raised a different response, but that was the rarity not the norm. The circumstances under which a grizzly would approach humans were usually related to surprise encounters at close range, often involving a food source the bear had claimed, or a female with dependent offspring. Even under those circumstances, if you stayed calm and backed off, they would almost always respond the same way.

As I watched a young grizzly in our yard the other evening, I was thinking how different this bear seemed from the grizzly bears I had come to know here three decades ago. The availability of secure foraging habitat at low elevations has shrunk to a fraction of what it was. New developments are spreading across the valley. The chance that a grizzly will avoid bumping into humans is smaller by the day.

And the high elevation whitebark pine, whose nuts are an important high fat food resource, is failing. The decline of whitebark has compelled bears to spend more time at lower elevations. These bears are highly vulnerable to the temptations of fat drippings on BBQ's, high calorie horse grain and dog food, garbage, and carrion in the form of road kill, and hunter kills.

More and more frequently, we are seeing grizzlies who have lost their natural aversion to human presence. This is directly related to our own actions, as we have not always been careful to keep our bear attractants secured and unavailable to the bears. Grizzly bears have virtually no control over the changes occurring in their environment. We do.

DNA, continued

When bears tipped over a grease trap at a local business in late September, Tim Manley believed he'd found his culprit. He set up a culvert trap and an infrared camera. The digital image revealed something astounding: five grizzlies licking grease in the soil. The owners quickly repaired the damage and disposed of the grease. The soil was excavated. Two male grizzlies were trapped and held while the laboratory tested their DNA, but the captured bears proved innocent. Tim set traps on Cold Lakes Road and at Falls Creek Ranch. Two more grizzlies were

captured, and it was the same story. None of the bears' DNA matched trouble. So they've been set free to lumber back into the wild drainages and open slopes—or so we hope.

Nobody wants to euthanize these creatures. They are part of what makes this region what it is: an increasingly rare wild area in a world that is changing so fast it makes your head spin. Of course we in the Swan feel these changes, too. There is less wild country. Less snow. More traffic. And while

DNA, continued

many of the changes are disheartening, some are good, like the non-invasive means of pinpointing problem bears, so we might coexist more happily together. But the program needs our help. In a strange way, we are its executors. While Congress has just approved continued budgeting for the DNA program—the largest wildlife study of its kind in the world—they don't know where the trouble makers are until we report them. According to Tim Manley, every bear situation is evaluated on a case-by-case basis. A bear might be causing problems in your yard because your neighbor's garbage has proved an attractant. Once biologists know where the bear is, they might be able to remove the lure before the bear becomes a repeat offender like Albino #191. What went wrong with him? It's hard to say exactly, but he must have received more than one reward for his behavior, and gone unreported for some time. In a happier world, he never would have been rewarded in the first place.

As I write these words, the grizzly recently trapped and radio collared at Falls Creek Ranch, has just been picked up off the side of Highway 83, where he was struck and killed by a truck (see story, page 2). You may have seen him early as the sun slid over the Swans, pristine almost, a mound of soft brown fur lying in the tall grass as if he had simply gone to sleep, a reminder of the damage we seem unable to stop ourselves from causing. But at least we can try.

\$10,000 REWARD

offered for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the illegal killing of any grizzly bears in the Swan/Seeley Valley.

Call 1-800-TIP-MONT
847-6668

All calls are confidential.



Bear Troubles, Whom To Call

Tim Manley, grizzly bear management specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

Cell phone: (406) 250-1265
Home phone: (406) 892-0802

Eric Wenum, black bear and mountain lion specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

Office phone: (406) 752-5501
Cell phone: (406) 250-0062
Home phone: (406) 756-1776

Emergencies

Dial **911** if you live in Seeley Lake or Condon
If you live in Swan Lake dial **886-2324**
Early reporting is critical

Permission for Bear Managers to Enter My Property

Landowner's name(s) _____

Permanent address _____

Local address _____

Telephone numbers(s) _____ e-mail address _____

Swan Valley telephone number _____

Permission granted until revoked by landowner(s) (check here)

Or time period during which access is permitted (month/day/year through month/day/year) _____

Signature(s) _____

Return this form to: Tim Manley, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 490 N. Meridian, Kalispell, MT 59901

How To Prevent Bear Problems

Each of us is responsible for keeping a clean “camp,” and ensuring that we do not encourage problem behavior among bears. Here are some tips:

- Haul garbage to the dump as often as possible.
- Feed pets inside. If this is not feasible, do not leave uneaten pet food outside, especially overnight.
- Keep coolers, refrigerators or freezers **inside**, even if empty!
- Clean and securely store barbecue grills.
- Keep pet food, garbage, human food and all odorous food-like items secure in a sturdy building away from doors and windows, in a bear proof container or elevated in an Alaska-style cache.
- Do not leave food or garbage in your vehicle.
- It is best not to feed birds in summer and fall. If you must (bird species that live here do not require feeding by humans), place only a small amount of seed into the feeder each day so that it will be completely consumed before dark.
- Bring hummingbird feeders in at night or while you're away. An alternative to hummingbird feeders is a hanging basket of bright colored flowers, like fuchsias.
- Avoid planting clover. It is not native, and it is becoming a favorite among bears.
- Avoid feeding deer grain. Supplemental feeding interferes with a deer's ability to digest natural foods, and deer will attract mountain lions, an additional threat.
- If you have a vegetable garden, especially carrots, consider placing an electric fence around the perimeter, or hang “critter-gitters.” Pull carrots by September 15th, a magic carrot hour for bears according to Tim Manley.
- Compost piles are not recommended.
- Avoid using bone meal on gardens.
- Do not leave fish entrails alongside streams or trails. Puncture the air bladder and sink the entrails in deep water, or pack them out.
- Hang game in a very secure building or Alaska-style cache. Butcher meat as soon as possible. If you must hang meat outside, hang it at least 10 feet off the ground and 4 feet away from trees.
- Pick fruit as it ripens.
- If there is a bear in your yard and it doesn't appear to be just passing through, make noise by banging pots and pans together and shouting to try to encourage the bear to leave. Do not approach the bear.
- A general rule of thumb: anything with an odor, even if it is not food-related can attract bears to your property. Keep anything with an odor in a secure place (bears have been known to get into motor oil, antifreeze, gasoline, paint and cleaning agents).

The SWAN VALLEY BEAR NEWS is published as a cooperative effort of the Living With Wildlife Foundation; Northwest Connections; Swan Ecosystem Center; Swan Valley residents; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Flathead National Forest.

The Bears Need Your Help

Swan Valley Bear News is funded in large part by private donations. To donate send a check earmarked for the bears to Swan Ecosystem Center, 6887 Highway 83, Condon MT 59826. Contact us if you want to contribute with your credit card 406/754-3137, 406/754-3138.

Visit our Bear Aware web page at SwanEcosystemCenter.com.



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