

Close Encounter with a Grizzly Bear

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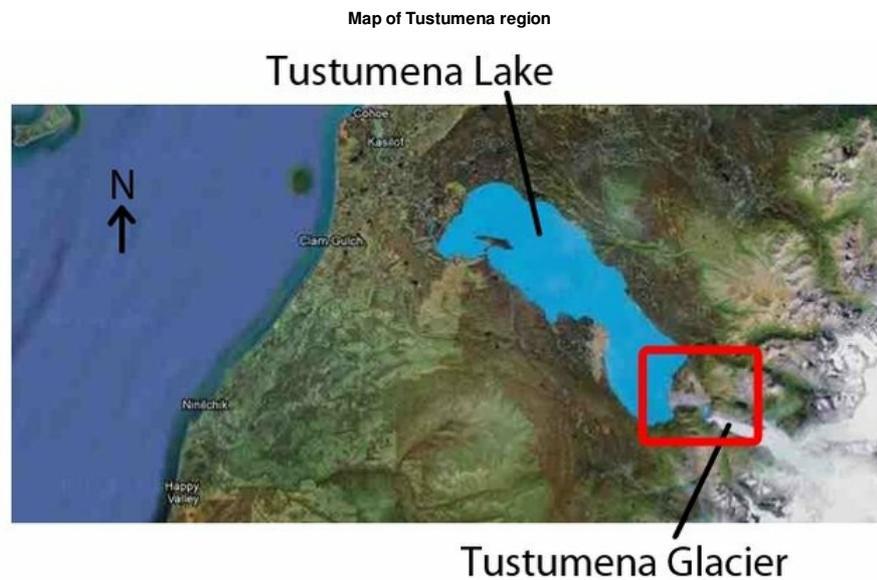
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An essay by Mike Borden

Exhausted and relieved, we pulled our kayaks ashore. Over the better part of the last two days, the three of us, **Bjorn Olsen, Kim McNett, and I**, had kayaked the length of Tustumena Lake in southcentral Alaska. Armed with 10 days worth of food, a .22 rifle, and a plethora of camera gear, we had come for one reason: to photograph the glacier that lie beyond the eastern shore of Tustumena Lake.

"What followed was utter disbelief. We stood there wide eyed as we each processed what had just happened."

Right from the start, it was apparent that the region we landed in could be trafficked by bears. In fact, we had been warned even before we left. On the first day, as we launched our kayaks from a public campsite on the western edge of Tustumena Lake, a nearby fisherman engaged us in conversation. He asked questions about what we were doing and spoke casually about his luck fishing from the shore in the days previous. But just as we were sliding



Map of Tustumena Lake and Glacier

our kayaks into the water to begin our journey, he told us something that would prove prophetic. In the same casual delivery, he mentioned that he had recently heard that a bear mauled someone out near the glacier. We began our journey nevertheless; my first Ground Truth Trekking supported adventure had begun. A few days later when we arrived at the eastern edge of the lake, we started seeing red salmon along the shore and up the river nearby. When we finally stepped ashore, we were immediately welcomed by a pile of bear poop with salmon bones in it. This served as a stark a reminder that bears frequented this part of the coast. But all the while I reacted nonchalantly to the threat of a bear, encouraged by Bjorn's vast wilderness experience and absence of concern, and my own past luck with camping in questionable locations. If we were going to be in this small drainage area for over a week, I thought, then this spot was about as good as any we would find. Inspired by convenience and the thought of a warm meal, we made up our minds as well as our campsite, which was right along the shore of Tustumena Lake.

By the time we had settled in and eaten dinner, it was roughly 8-9 PM and we were left with an hour or two of late summer sunlight. As we had just spent nearly two full days journeying to this glacier, the anticipation

<http://www.groundtruthtrekking.org/journeys/GrizzlyEncounter.html>

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to see it up close was building. The three of us collectively decided to hike that evening to the snout of the glacier, which was roughly 2.5 miles from our campsite. Along with an assortment of camera gear, I stuffed a can of bear spray into my day pack. In a little over an hour, this simple decision would probably save my life.

We were looking for both an efficient route from the coast to the glacier as well as a potential campsite nearer to where we would be working. Bjorn walked the gravelly bank of the river while Kim and I skirted the nearby ridge of forest. Taking separate but similar paths, we whooped and hollered loudly, hoping that any bear in the area would hear us and depart before a potential encounter. No signs of bears would be found during this leg of the journey.

Before long, it came into sight: the beautiful Tustumena Glacier. Ancient blue ice, deep crevices, and a ragged snout welcomed us. Though not a huge glacier, it would give us plenty to work with in the coming week ahead. Immediately our imaginations ran wild.



A panoramic view of Tustumena Glacier

We could set up our time-lapse cameras there and there. We could hike up the ridge to the north and image the glacier from above. We could easily paddle our pack rafts to the face and get close enough to feel the cold that it brought with it as it descended from the mountains. There was good reason to be excited as we turned away from the glacier that evening. We would start our work early in the morning the next day, setting up the time-lapse cameras and moving our gear. We would begin capturing much of what we saw and felt as we spent the next week near the face of Tustumena Glacier. But for now, it was time to return to our camp as the sun was in the process of setting. Little did we know that at almost that exact moment, a group of bears were paying a visit to our campsite.

The hike back was pleasant, as the setting sun painted the sky before us. It quickly disappeared behind Mount Redoubt. The world grew dark, and the shapes around us dim. The landscape was quiet, but we were noisy, engrossed in loud conversation. We still let

Sunset behind Mount Redoubt



Roughly 20 minutes before the bear encounter

out the occasional warning yell, but were content with the amount of noise we made talking. We walked along a sandy corridor that ran along the river. To our left was the ridge of forest we had walked earlier and to our right were the river and scattered willow bushes. Though there was no trail of any kind, the corridor was flat and perfect for easy walking. It was when we were roughly half a mile from our camp when I looked ahead and saw a dark form moving in the distance. It was the first bear I had ever seen in the Alaska backcountry.

The Encounter

(1) We stopped walking and watched, and within a few seconds the bear took shape, walking along the same corridor in front of us.

From 100 yards away, in the fading light, we thought we were looking at a lone black bear. We weren't overly concerned, but decided to be cautious. We left the sandy corridor we had been walking. We began to yell at the bear.

"BEAR! WE SEE YOU!"

I opened my daypack and quickly retrieved my can of bear spray.

(1) Within seconds, we saw a second bear, and then a third. Finally, a larger bear came into view. It was a grizzly sow with three second-year cubs. Though now we were a bit alarmed, we continued to yell, remaining close together. (2a) and (2b) The next few moments are a blur that I've pieced into a story from our three hazy accounts, well after the event. The cubs began to run along the sandy corridor (2a) toward the spot we had been standing in moments before. The sow followed closely behind. But after about 10-20 yards, she changed direction (2b) and charged directly at us.

(2) As soon as we saw the cubs start to run, we quickened our pace off of the corridor. When I saw the sow change directions, I felt shock and disbelief set in. I could tell the others felt the same as our yells at the bears quickly became perplexed mutterings of surprise, our words now aimed at no one in particular. We rushed further from the corridor. I pulled the safety off of my can of bear spray.

(3) We quickly but deliberately walked toward a small willow bush that was nearby, passed by it on our right and collectively turned to move in the same direction the bear was now running.

(3) During these long seconds, we could hear thunderous footsteps approaching behind us at an alarming rate. She had overbearing speed. There was no running from this bear.

(4a) and (4b) Bjorn and Kim bent their run close to the willow bush and put it between them and the bear (4b). I passed the willow without any real plan for my next move. Unfortunately, this left me with my back to the bear and without any cover (4a). When I turned around, I saw Bjorn and Kim dodge behind the bush. A moment later, the grizzly arrived. I thought to dash for the willow, but it was too late.

(4) The grizzly's speed decreased as she rounded the corner past the willow. Still in motion, she looked to her right at Bjorn and Kim. Then she turned her head, looked directly at me, and charged directly at me. She was no more than 15 to 20 feet away and close enough that I could hear her grunting as she moved.

I began to spray her when she was between 5 and 10 feet from me, and still charging. Bear spray is basically a very strong pepper spray. It can deter an irritable bear, but not incapacitate a determined one. I had never used it before. I aimed my first shots poorly, as her speed made an accurate shot difficult. The can expelled spray in a highly concentrated, directed stream, surrounded by a lesser cloud. At best, she may have gotten some of that cloud in her face, but none of the direct spray. She showed no reaction.

I didn't move at all as she charged. There simply was not time to run, and there would have hardly been enough time to drop to the ground. Neither likely would have been good options regardless. Running would

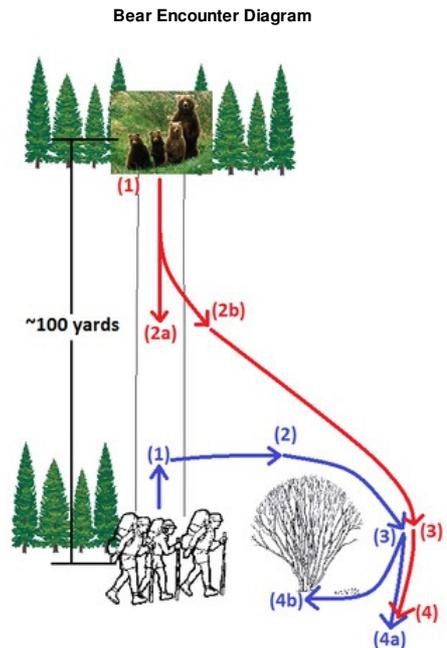


Diagram showing how the bear moved in relation to our group

have been a poor decision given the incredible speed she displayed during her approach. Triggering her predator-prey instincts also would have been a poor decision. "Stand your ground" rang through my mind, as this is what I had been told before I entered the backcountry. So I did. I stood my ground as the large, aggravated grizzly bear charged now from less than 10 feet away.

She slowed almost to a stop no more than a foot or two in front of me and got up on her hind legs, looming over me. I thought she would trample me. Bjorn and Kim later recalled that the way she maintained her charge without hesitation and reared up over me, lead them to believe that she was going in for direct contact.

I sprayed upward, towards her face. Though she was very close, spraying her directly in the eyes and nose was difficult. I believe the spray hit her mostly in the lower part of her face around her mouth. It created a considerable cloud around her face.

Her next move surprised me. Though nearly stopped, her remaining momentum carried her big body forward and she leaned towards me. She reached out with an open right paw and touched me softly on the left shoulder. Then, rather than trampling through me, she side-stepped to my right, completely avoiding me. I believe that she reacted to the bear spray.

The speed of the encounter stunned me, as did the outcome. I looked at my shoulder; I was unharmed. I later examined my clothing where she touched me and found not even a mark of dirt or dust. Her touch was so soft, and almost gentle. I turned around quickly to find that the bear had not run off. She was still nearby and making no sign of leaving.

She turned around, and began to walk back towards me. She was no more than 10 feet away and not moving quickly. This time, my aim was better. The highly concentrated, directed spray hit her squarely in the eyes and nose for somewhere between 2 and 3 seconds.

Behind the willow, Bjorn hurried to load his rifle while Kim watched. He brought the .22 not for bear defense, but for hunting grouse. It was grossly underpowered for trying to deter a bear. Bjorn recounted reaching for his .22 for a lack of a better option. He knew he could use it a noise maker, but shooting the bear with it might only aggravate her more. It mattered little as the encounter would be over before he could load a single bullet.

The grizzly had no immediately obvious physical reaction to the bear spray: no coughing, change in breathing, or shaking of her head in discomfort. It did seem, however, that the spray dissuaded her from moving closer towards me. Finally she turned to her left and ran away, likely in the direction of her running cubs. From the moment we saw the first cub, to the moment the sow ran away, only 1 minute had passed.

Was it over? She had run away, but she could just as easily change her mind. I handed Kim what was left of the bear spray, feeling rattled and not ready to use it again. We stood at the spot of the encounter for about 30 seconds before I really felt like she had left for good. We were stunned, but collected. There were no tears and no panic, just disbelief. Once we verified that none of us were harmed, we laughed and hugged. Her tracks then became the focus of our attention. We observed how deep they were in the loose sand and recalled how heavy her footsteps had sounded during her approach.

Looking back, we all agree that the bear spray likely saved our lives. Each time I sprayed her, she reacted in direct proportion to the accuracy of the spray. The more direct the spray was to her eyes and nose, the less she wanted to be near me. I am beyond grateful that I had that can of spray when I needed it. In a situation where it seemed we had little to no control, the bear spray gave us a way to stand our ground and fight back. In this case, it was our only way.

As we started back to our campsite, I brushed my eye with an unwary finger, not realizing that I was covered in bear spray. An intense stinging consumed me. I walked back to camp with one eye as we carefully weaved our way across small rocky streams in the dark. I was still consumed with disbelief. I wasn't scared

and I wasn't miserable: I just couldn't believe what had happened. I knew that I now carried with me one

Bear Print in Camp



The print found in our campsite upon returning after the bear encounter

heck of a story. We speculated about the condition of our campsite. It appeared as if the bears had come from that direction based on how they moved when we first saw them. If they had damaged our gear it would be an inconvenience. If they had damaged our kayaks, we would likely be immobile. The latter could prove very troublesome. We nervously approached our campsite, and upon closer examination, were pleased to find everything intact, undamaged. This was not to say that the bears hadn't visited though, as we found a fresh bear print in the mud roughly 20 feet from where we had set up our tents. It seemed they had come and gone within just a few hours of our arrival to the drainage. Quite the welcoming crew! We started a large campfire and talked about the encounter in meticulous detail,

piecing it together based on each of our experiences and perspectives. We decided that we would pack up our camp in the morning and return home.

We awoke with more confidence than I expected and took our time in the morning to start a fire and make breakfast. Our casual demeanor was brought on by the likelihood that the bear was still feeling the painful effects of the spray and would not be looking for a repeat encounter. We decided that we would pack up our gear and walk back to the site of the encounter. We were all interested in seeing the bear's footprints in the daylight to take pictures and recall what had happened the night before. Kim walked to the nearby river to refill our water bottles. Within minutes, we saw her running back towards us in clear fright. The bears were back. Kim had seen two of the cubs casually walking along the river, just a few hundred yards from our campsite. Frenzied, we packed our remaining gear, hastily loaded our kayaks, and pushed off from shore. As our kayaks cleared the edge of our little inlet and slid into the vastness of Tustumena Lake, we took a big sigh of relief. It felt like we had escaped. We were truly fleeing with our tails between our legs but after our luck in the past 12 hours, we were frankly just fine with that being the case.

Bear Encounter Advice

Now in the safety of my home back in Tucson, Arizona, I feel lucky to be able to reflect on my encounter. The outcome could hardly have been better given the circumstances: we all walked away with no more than a scratch and a good story. I know we were lucky. But what could we have done differently? Was there a way to prevent such an encounter before it escalated to what did eventually happen? And what did we do right?

I can't begin to explain how many times I've told this story and heard in response, "you should have brought a gun". I won't say that this is bad advice, as there are a number of stories where a gun has stopped a charging bear. But after reading about the effectiveness of guns versus bear spray, I believe bear spray is the more effective defense against an aggressive bear.

In the last decade, two major studies have compared the effectiveness of guns versus bear spray. The **first**, conducted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, looked at human and bear encounters between 1992 and 2005 and found that when guns were used to defend against a bear, the user was uninjured 50% of the time. That number went up to 98% when bear spray was used. The injuries sustained during bear spray encounters were also far less severe than when guns were used. Thomas Smith, a bear biologist from Brigham Young University **found similar results**. In an analysis of 20 years of bear encounters, he found that bear spray was effective in preventing injury 92% of the time, compared to 67% for guns.

Why is using a gun so much less effective? **Recent research** has shown that it takes an average of 4 direct hits with a bullet to stop a bear. After witnessing firsthand how quickly a bear can cover 100 yards, it's frightening to consider the speed and calm demeanor required to fire off 4 accurate shots with a gun. Such a

situation would be intimidating for highly experienced hunters much less the average person. Many human-bear encounters happen at close range (for example: when hikers turn a corner on a trail and end up face to face with a bear) and you often have only a few seconds to defend yourself. In those few seconds, I believe that putting up a large, self-dispersing cloud of bear spray is easier than accurately shooting a bear 4 times. From our experience with the speed of the encounter, Bjorn was not even able to load 1 bullet before the entire encounter was over. If you succeed at loading and shooting a bear, then at best you have a dead bear, and at worst, you have a wounded and very irritated bear. Neither is ideal, with the latter case posing a very serious threat to the human. With bear spray, both parties are more likely to go home without serious injury. In addition, many national parks have bans on guns, making a stronger case for bear spray.

More information and tips about safely camping in bear country can be found [here](#).

One of the less obvious benefits of carrying bear spray is that it gave me the confidence to stand my ground during her charge. When I had that bear spray in my hand and ready to fire, I knew that I had a means of defending myself. It undoubtedly helped me to keep calm and clear headed. It's scary to speculate what I would have done if I had not been carrying the spray. Would I have tried to run? Would I have dropped to the dirt? Would I have had the courage to stand my ground? I can't predict what instincts would have been triggered within me in that moment. But this I know for certain: I am grateful I was not abandoned to making a tough instinctual decision.

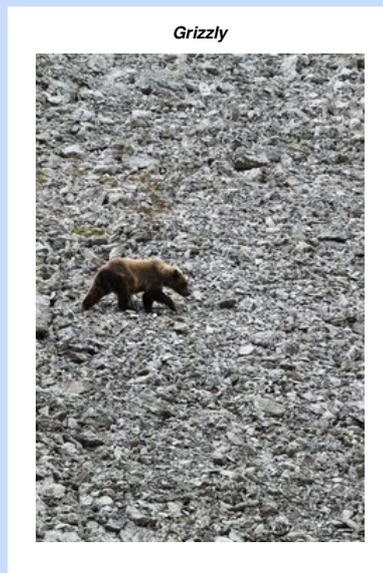
Had I been given time to prepare and plan for the exact situation we encountered, what would my plan of action have been? What should you do if you meet a bear? First, **make noise when hiking in bear country** as this can help to mitigate bear encounters. My protocol was to give a loud yell every few minutes to warn a bear early that I was approaching. This should be done regularly. Next, if encountered by a bear that charges, **stand your ground and talk in a calm, deep voice**. Our first mistake during our encounter was trying to escape from her. I do think it was wise to leave the corridor we had been walking, to give them space, but once she began to charge us, I think it was unwise for us to try to evade her. Running from a bear is not a good idea. You will not outrun them (they can run up to 30 mph!) and running has the potential to trigger their predator-prey instincts. You do not want them to think they are chasing a meal. We should have stopped and stood our ground the moment we saw her charge. By talking in a calm, deep voice, you make it clear to the bear that you are a human and that they should be wary to attack.

Finally, **everyone should carry bear spray and have it easily accessible**. Carrying a can of bear spray but having it buried at the bottom of your pack does not do you any good. Leaving your bear spray at camp while you hike around nearby also isn't going to help you when you need it. In our case, we had 2 more cans of spray back at camp doing us no good at all when the bears appeared. Your bear spray **MUST** be with you and in a place where it can be grabbed quickly. This simple preparation can save your life. As an added precaution, I often carry my spray in hand in areas with dense vegetation and low visibility. If all of us had been armed with bear spray at Tustumena, I think we might have stood our ground in the first place, and not tried to evade our bear. We could have hit her with a considerable amount of spray during her approach, which may have been enough to turn her around early in her charge. By making noise when hiking in bear country, standing your ground, and being ready and willing to use bear spray, the odds of survival during a bear encounter are greatly improved.



A reenactment of sorts of the bear encounter

Though the above procedures are useful in deterring a bear attack, avoiding a bear encounter altogether is a significantly better scenario. Be conscientious about where a campsite is located, as well as when and where you choose to hike. In our situation, our very specific goals and destination drove where we wanted to camp. We could have camped inconveniently far from the glacier but in a safer location. We took a risk for the sake of convenience which proved to be a poor



Grizzly bears can be bullies. As crazy as it sounds, it's important to stand up to them when they are. When bears charge, they are usually trying to neutralize a threat to themselves or their young. But they may be scared of you, just as you are scared of them. Though they are much larger and more powerful than an unarmed human, they are known to be cautious when encountering other creatures, even if they're much smaller. Bears gain some serious respect for small creatures after getting a face full of porcupine quills at a young age. Though you are smaller, they don't know what kind of punch you may be able to pack. Even a non-fatal wound may be enough to hinder survival. Broken limbs may not kill bears immediately, but may be enough to

prevent them from gathering the calories they will need to survive a harsh winter. In most cases, when there is risk of injury involved, bears prefer to not get involved. By standing your ground, you can send the message to the bear that you are not food and that they need to be cautious.

decision. Be aware of nearby sources of food for bears. In our case, the nearby stream with salmon in it was an obvious attraction for bears. Regions where berries are readily available are also an attraction for bears. Be alert for signs that bears may be nearby. Bear poop is an excellent indicator, especially if it's fresh. Scratch marks on nearby trees is also a sign that bears may be nearby. All of these attractions and indications of bears should be avoided if possible when choosing a campsite. Choose areas likely to have less bear traffic. Your camp food and smelly gear are also a potential source of food for a hungry bear. Making your food and smellables inaccessible to a bear can be done using bear bins, bear bags hung from trees, or Kevlar bear proof bags outside of camp. All of which should be placed at a significant distance from camp. Cooking meals away from camp will also prevent bears from becoming curious and wandering into your campsite. Avoid hiking during times when bears are most active. This is often in the early morning and late evening when they tend to be feeding.

Personal Reflection

"I hope this doesn't make you want to stop being in the wilderness", Bjorn said to me a few days later. His concern was genuine and the possibility reasonable after such an intense experience. Even so, it caught me off guard: in the last few days of heavy reflection, I hadn't once considered it. I remember well the moment I decided to spend my summer in Alaska. I was drawn there by its wildness. I sought raw, uncontrolled nature and maps without trails. I saw meaning in experiencing the Alaskan backcountry for it was there I had hoped to find personal growth and inspiration.

Looking back, my encounter with the grizzly bear highlighted what I had so greatly respected about Alaska in the first place: it IS still wild and dangerous. In most parts of our country, man has crushed and stomped out danger. Animals have been pushed out and hunted. My experience with the bear was humbling. It reminded me that we live in a world in which survival has always been a struggle, a place where death is an active part of life. While the modern comforts I enjoy made me forget, Alaska reminded me that this is true. My experience with the bear also reminded me that my life is fragile. It taught me to be grateful to be alive

and for the people around me. It made me more aware of the risks that I am often willing to take. Finally, Alaska reminded me why I continue to look for fulfillment and meaning in my life. Though the method was utterly unexpected, I was given an experience that epitomized what I had hoped to learn in Alaska in the first place. I wanted to know its wildness. This is why I knew I would return. Ultimately, it was the reason I had come. Alaska humbled me. It offered me perspective and gifted me reflectance. Alaska had taught me of its incredible wildness.

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Bear Paw Tattoo



Bear encounter inspired tattoo