

# Special Report: A Bad Year In Grizzly Country

**A report on what happens when men and bears collide, and why there were so many encounters in 2004.**

Article by Hal Herring.  
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Photo by Field & Stream Online Editors

Three hunters were mauled by grizzly bears in the Rockies in 2004, which was double the annual average. At least 1,250 of the big animals now roam Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming—and if a hunter is doing everything right to bag an elk—heading stealthily into the wind and bugling like a bull in rut—he is also doing everything right to set up an encounter with the largest predator in the West. And when men and grizzlies collide, the outcome can be disastrous for both.

Wally Cash has hunted and guided the Pilgrim Creek elk country near Moran, Wyoming, for 44 seasons. On September 21, 2004, Cash was hunting alone, planning to cross a ridge and meet up with one of his partners. His hunting

party had killed a bull the day before, and the fresh gut pile was nearby. As he climbed the steep side of the ridge, there was no way he could have known that just over the summit, a big sow grizzly and her cubs were passing by. When Cash appeared at the top of the ridge, the sow attacked him.

“I didn’t see her until she was 4 feet away,” Cash says. “You don’t even know what’s happening.” His rifle flew out of his hands as the bear struck him in the ribs, knocked him 15 feet back down the slope, and piled on top of him. His can of bear spray was in his pocket, out of reach. The bear bit through the hand and fingers he used to protect his neck, and she raked his head with her teeth, one of the bites breaking through his skull and tearing out a piece of bone the size of a quarter from above his ear. “I heard her bite into my skull and thought, ‘Darn, that’s no good!’ but I kept playing dead as well as I could, and she ran off to check her cubs, I think. Then she came back and batted me around with her feet, just light, but enough to leave black marks all over me.”

Cash lay still for a long time on the hillside until he was sure the sow was gone. He staggered to his feet, found his rifle, and fired a single shot to get his partners’ attention. “I yelled, Help!” Cash says, “and of course they thought I was saying ‘Elk!’ but that brought them in too.”

Eighteen days later, on the other side of Togwotee Pass, another Wyoming elk hunter, 32-year-old Weston Scott, had ridden by horseback into the spectacular Moccasin Basin northwest of Dubois, a place he had hunted with his father since childhood. Scott and his friend Aaron Hughes left their horses behind and took off on foot, hunting a few hundred yards apart, hoping to push some elk out of a band of timber. They had seen a gut pile, so they knew that someone had found elk there, and the place was loaded with sign.

“I could hear something crashing through the timber,” Scott says, “and I smelled elk on the breeze.” He slowed down and quietly closed the distance, looking hard into the shadows. “At that time I really thought I was on a big bull, and I had a touch of elk fever.” Reaching a thicket of spruce trees, he stopped to listen and peer inside. “And all I saw was this big grizzly head busting out of there, coming straight at me. I fired one shot from the hip, and then I was caught.”

Scott’s bullet went high, and the 600-pound boar grizzly grabbed him by the face. “I remember hearing my teeth cracking and my jaw breaking,” he says, “but I lucked out and got knocked backward between two trees and wedged there, kind of protected.” Scott fumbled for his bear spray, but he grabbed the wrong side of it and couldn’t get the safety clip off. “I wasn’t very familiar with how it worked, and the bear was huffing and jumping up and down on me. It was like being caught in a tornado.” The bear swatted his knees, shredding his pants and leaving long gashes in his legs. It bit his side but got mostly a mouthful of jacket. The attack was over as quickly as it had begun.

Aaron Hughes didn’t hear his friend being mauled, but he heard a shot followed by the sound of heavy breathing and heavy feet running “flat out” through the woods. This was his first trip to Wyoming’s backcountry, and he didn’t know what kind of animal made that sound. But he soon found out. “It came into sight, running straight at me,” Hughes says. He raised his Savage bolt-action 7mm magnum. When the bear was 12 steps away he picked up a blur of brown hair through the scope and fired. The bear turned and bit himself where the bullet had hit, stood up, and then dropped to all fours and came rushing at him again. “At nine steps I shot again and knocked him down,” Hughes says. This time the bear did not move. Hughes went looking for Scott

and found him with another member of their party who had wrapped Scott's face in a T-shirt already soaked through with blood.

### **Almost Daily Encounters**

There are an estimated 1,250 grizzly bears roaming the northern Rocky Mountains from the Yellowstone area to the Canadian border, up from 250 back in 1975. Although the present population, which is listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, is a mere shadow of the vast nation of grizzlies-as many as 50,000-that lived in the West when Lewis and Clark crossed the Mississippi River, it is high enough that encounters, close shaves, and outright attacks are becoming much more common.

In the past 10 years, 54 percent of all grizzly bear attacks in the Yellowstone region involved hunters, the highest percentage of any kind of recreationists to be attacked. According to bear management specialist Mark Bruscano of Wyoming's Game and Fish Department, the number of conflicts is rising fast, along with the population of grizzlies.

"Encounters are almost daily during hunting season," Bruscano says. "We don't even keep track of them anymore unless somebody gets hurt or a camp gets trashed." The statistics say that 1.4 hunters every year will be injured in a grizzly bear attack. But some years the risk is higher.

The risk is high for the bears, too. Last year wasn't just a bad one for hunter-bear encounters, it was also disastrous for grizzlies in general. By the end of November, 19 bears had been killed by people in the Yellowstone region. The majority of those deaths were due to a variety of causes ranging from collisions with vehicles to the culling of nuisance bears by wildlife management agencies. But two were shot by hunters who wrongly identified them as black bears, and at least one was killed by a

hunter in self-defense. If such a high mortality rate continues, the grizzly may never achieve a recovery that enables it to be delisted.

One of the reasons that 2004 saw more encounters was that the whitebark pines produced few cones, which are a key food source for bears trying to layer on fat for hibernation. A late spring frost at higher elevations had already ruined the serviceberry, buffaloberry, and chokecherry crop.

"In a good year, grizzlies will stay up high and kind of park in the whitebark pine country," says Dr. Chris Servheen, chief bear biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "and you'll see less conflict. But in a bad feed year like 2004, they range far and wide. You are likely to see them almost anywhere." A male grizzly in a normal season in Yellowstone may roam across 350 square miles. In a bad season, it may need four times that much country to find enough food. And scattered throughout that territory are a lot of elk and mule deer hunters. "If you are going in there to hunt," says Bruscano, "you need to know what you are getting into."

At highest risk are bowhunters who hunt the early fall season when bears are in the grip of hyperphagia, gobbling as many calories as possible to prepare for winter. Grizzlies seldom kill human beings for food, but attacks occur when hunters surprise bears that are feeding, or when people are mistaken for prey. It is not hard to imagine that a bowhunter-creeping through the whitebark pines while blowing a bugle call, doused with elk scent and camouflaged from head to toe-will sooner or later find himself face-to-face with a bear.

Kevin Frey, an avid bowhunter himself, is a Montana game warden in charge of investigating grizzly conflicts. "There is no doubt that elk calls attract the attention of bears," says Frey. "Let's just face this fact: Archery hunters, by the very nature of their pursuit, are doing

everything wrong." Frey hunts the early season with an elk call in the whitebarks and has plenty of his own bear stories as a result. So far, he's been lucky. But others have not fared so well.

On September 15, 2001, Steve Chamberlain and Dave Wood were resting from a day of hunting their favorite elk country deep in the Taylor Fork of Montana's Gallatin River area. Chamberlain, a surgeon, had made the marathon drive from his home in Medford, Oregon, after the terror attacks of 9/11 had shut down the airlines, to meet Wood for their annual hunting trip. It had been a slow day, the valley as hot and dry as a kiln. Not a single bull had answered their calls. What they had seen was bear sign, and lots of it. Like last year, 2001 was a lean year for whitebark pinecones and berries. Bears were hungry and on the move. As the sun set the two friends sat together practicing their calls on a ridge above an old clear-cut area.

"All of a sudden, something huge was coming," says Chamberlain. "I was just reaching for an arrow, thinking it was a bull on the run. In retrospect, it didn't sound like hooves, but then I'd never heard that particular sound before." The source was the feet of three grizzly bears coming in, running so hard that Chamberlain remembers seeing dirt and rocks flying out behind them. "It was a big sow and two cubs, if you can call 500-pounders cubs." He reached for his .45 Browning pistol in the holster at his side, but he had barely touched the snap when the sow hit him. "I don't know how you can imagine the level of energy that is focused on you, or the level of intensity that is in a bear's eyes-there's no way to make a comparison in human terms."

The sow grabbed him at midcalf, above his boot, and snapped his fibula. "I thought, 'Oh, she broke my leg,' I remember, but then I went down hard, and my holster was pinned underneath me. Then we went up again, but every-

where we went, that holster was out of reach, like one of those bad dreams. At one point, she had my thigh completely in her mouth, clamping on it, and I thought about playing dead, then realized I was hitting her on the snout with my bow, which was still in my left hand.”

Grabbing him by the arm between the elbow and the shoulder, the bear threw him high into the air. “I looked down at her open mouth where she was trying to catch me, and I tg through the whitebark pines while blowing a bugle call, doused with elk scent and camouflaged from head to toe-will sooner or later find himself face-to-face with a bear.

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