

# How Three Men Survived Attacks by Grizzly Bears

Article by Hal Herring.

Field & Stream - January 31, 2005

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.

## **HUNTERS AS PREY**

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 everywhere 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 turned my head to the side.” The bear’s eye-tooth caught in his scalp and cut the top of his ear off, slicing a wide furrow around his head. “Our heads hit together so hard that something crunched, and I remember thinking, ‘Good, that must have hurt her some,’” says Chamberlain. “But it was actually my head making the noise.”

Just before he was tossed into the air, he had called out for Wood to help him. “I heard Steve yell, ‘She’s mauling me, Dave, help me out!’ but I was between Steve and the bears when they rushed in, and I had rolled over to protect myself, hoping that Steve wouldn’t shoot me when he shot the bear,” Wood says. “I had my hands clamped over my ears and wasn’t moving for all the tea in China.” But when he heard his friend shout, he stood, holding the can of pepper spray that he always carried when hunting the Taylor Fork. “She was a coal

black grizzly with a silver vee coming together on her chest, and she had Steve’s head in her mouth. I just ran straight at her, shooting the spray. Since I’d never shot it before, I wasn’t sure how it worked.”

The spray engulfed the bear, which dropped Chamberlain, and then blew back onto Wood, choking and burning him. Chamberlain had finally gotten his pistol out of its holster but could no longer raise his arm. “Now, I figured, we’re really in for it,” Wood says. “We were injured, choked, and all the bears had to do was pick us up.”

But it was over; the sow and the two giant cubs were gone. The attack had lasted mere seconds. Chamberlain had a broken leg, his ear was hanging by a thread of tissue, and his scalp was bleeding profusely, as were the bites in his thigh and upper arm, where his triceps had been torn loose. But with Wood’s help he was able to move. After two creek crossings and a long stagger on dark game trails, they found an old logging track that Wood knew could be reached by truck. Before he left to retrieve their vehicle, Wood took the pistol and fired a three-round SOS into the night sky.

“So I’m lying there in the dark for hours, with a pistol that’s only got four rounds left in it, listening to all these animals moving around me,” says Chamberlain. When Wood finally reappeared in the truck, Chamberlain could hardly believe his luck.

Both men believe that their bugling had called in the bears. “I think the sow was showing the cubs how it was done,” says Chamberlain, “rushing into what they thought was a mixed herd of elk, just like African lions will rush a herd of wildebeest. Dave was down on the ground. I was up, so I got hit.” Chamberlain also points out that he and Wood were wearing de-scented clothing and had the wind in their faces, so the bears could not have detected them until it was too late.

Experts say that while bowhunters put themselves in the most danger, it is rifle hunters who most often ignore the rules, feeling safe because they are well armed. Not coincidentally, more rifle hunters are attacked. Sometimes this occurs because bears and hunters surprise one another, as in Wally Cash’s case. Or like Weston Scott, a hunter finds out too late that the animal he’s stalking is not an elk but a fellow superpredator. “Hunters get so focused on hunting,” says Montana warden Kevin

Frey, “they forget there’s another hunter out there, bigger than them. You’ve got to be looking for bear sign, not just elk sign.”

The majority of people attacked by grizzlies are experienced outdoorsmen—hunters and guides and recreationists who have spent a lot of time in the woods. Most of them return to bear country. Mike Potas, a veteran guide who was mauled in the Thorofare area of Wyoming in October 2002, still guides hunters there, although he says that he now carries a short 12-gauge and a can of pepper spray when he’s working. C.J. Smith, a Minnesota hunter who was attacked like Cash near Moran in Wyoming, recovered from severe head wounds and still hunts out West every chance he gets. And Steve Chamberlain continues to hunt the Taylor Fork with buddy Dave Wood, both of them armed with pistol and pepper spray and an acutely heightened sense of awareness.

Chamberlain is left with physical reminders of that September sunset attack—he’s missing a part of his left triceps, he’s lost some hearing on one side, and the scars on his thigh are impressive. But he doesn’t hold a grudge against grizzlies. “During the fight, I’d have gladly killed her,” he says, “but not after. I was in her home, and I actually feel pretty lucky, given how badly I got touched by her, that I came out with so little permanent injury.” He also says that the experience of hunting in grizzly country is not something that he would give up. “The presence of grizzlies makes it so intense, you can’t think of work or what’s happening back home or anything else. You can’t just go lollygagging around back in there.”

But if bear attacks continue to increase, every hunter might not feel that way, and some might choose to pursue their game in places where the grizzlies don’t live. Weston Scott and Wally Cash are both pondering that option while recuperating in their hometown of Gillette, Wyoming. As of late October 2004, Scott was slowly returning to his job as an electrical contractor, and he says that if he goes back to the Moccasin Basin, he won’t hunt alone. “I’ve thought about switching over to hunt the Bighorns, too,” he says. “That’s what my wife wants me to do.”

Cash has a brand-new steel and titanium plate in his head, a ring finger pinned in three places, and quite a few aches and pains. But he was going back to work in

October, too, spraying noxious weeds on mines across northern Wyoming. His wife is adamant that he find somewhere without grizzly bears to hunt next year. “But you know,” Cash says, “hunting the same place for 44 years is a lot like being married to the same woman for that long. It’s hard to just up and switch.”