

B E A R !

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There are bears in Alaska – big brown bears that stand as tall as 10 feet and weigh close to a ton. At a distance they look awkwardly clumsy, slow, and, perhaps, even cute. The cuteness, and any perception of harmlessness, quickly dissipates when you stand near a stuffed and mounted grizzly, and is quickly replaced by an acute awareness of just how massive these creatures are, and how small you are in comparison. There is such a display in the Cook Hotel lobby in Anchorage. I've stood near it many times, completely awed by how fiercely designed these bears are. Aside from their massive girth, they are equipped with long, sharp claws that could easily shred the thickest of hides, and equally long and savage teeth set in the muscular jaws of their very thick skulls.

There had been a series of bear attacks that summer. Jeff and I spent many evenings discussing what we would do if we were attacked. We had come there to fish salmon, and being the commercial type of fishermen, we spent most of our time on the ocean, but when we were ashore, we liked to explore the wilderness of South East Alaska. Keenly aware that two redneck boys from California may never get such an opportunity, we didn't intend to waste it.

Jeff was fairly massive himself, and in a few bar fights I witnessed, one might be tempted to believe that Jeff could hold his own with a grizzly. With several shots of whisky in him, Jeff might be tempted to believe it as well.

Fortunately, our bear conversations normally took place on nights when whisky had found itself out of favor and replaced by beer – a

slower and more subdued friend, less apt to turn on you. It was in these moments of fuzzy clarity that we discussed just how big these bears were, and freely confessed that we were no match for them.

I had read that it was best to make a lot of noise when walking through the woods, so as to not surprise a bear. The theory is that the bear, improbable as it might sound, is more frightened of humans than we are of bears. This particular author suggested singing loudly. Jeff wasn't much of a singer, but I argued that this might actually be a plus when it came to deterring bear attacks, and he grudgingly agreed.

The real problem was that we lacked firepower if an attack did occur. Jeff had his .44 Magnum handgun with him, and I carried a 30-30 Winchester Rifle, but either was woefully inadequate against a grizzly bear. Our only chance, we postulated, was to simultaneously open fire on an attacking bear. Perhaps our combined firepower could stop an attack.

That summer was a windy one, and we had to duck into sheltered coves and passages several times when the seas became too rough. On one occasion, we hid behind a cluster of islands, anchored in a well-protected cove, which was the picture of the stereotypical Alaskan experience. While the storm raged out on the ocean, all was calm and peaceful in our little cove. Surrounded by the finest in God's nature, we soon became bored with being on the boat and rowed ashore to try our luck with rods and reels.

At a stream that fed into the cove, we started catching pink salmon on every cast. This also became boring, simply because of the miserable lack of challenge involved. I suggested we explore the tree line.

The cove had a grassy beach all around which extended about a hundred yards, or so, inland to the forested portion of the island. As we walked the tree line, I saw a little hollow that penetrated about forty feet into the trees. At the end of the hollow, I caught a glimpse of what looked like a piece of clothing.

Well, nature lovers from the lower 48 states might not find this unusual, but in Alaska, you don't see many evidences of human encroachment into the wild, so it was a curiosity I intended to explore in more depth.

As I walked into the hollow, I saw that it was, indeed, a shirt, one that had obviously been there for some time, as evidenced by the muddiness and rottenness of the fabric.

Suddenly, off to my left I heard something huge moving through the brush. From the sound of it, I guessed it to be as large as a small u-haul truck. It moved slowly till it was about ten yards from me, then stopped. I couldn't see it, but it was definitely there. I was so surprised to hear something so large, that I didn't immediately connect the dots. Once I did, though, I felt a cold blast of fear blow right through me: Bear !

I raised my gun and released the safety, then looked behind me to alert Jeff to the bear's presence. No need to sound the alarm, I realized, when I saw Jeff running out of the hollow - so much for our well thought out plan.

“What now?” I frantically thought.

“Singing! I forgot to sing! Maybe it's not too late!”

In my fear, I couldn't think of any songs to sing, but I finally remembered a few words from “Oh Susanna”. Unfortunately, my

voice had left me entirely, and what came out of my mouth was more of a whispered version.

“Oh – Su – sanna “ I whispered loudly. “Wont – you – come – fo - mee”

Slowly, while whisper / singing the worst rendition of that song ever given, I backed out of the trees. I was mighty relieved to not hear the bear follow me.

Jeff and I never discussed this afterwards. I think he was a bit embarrassed that the plan had fallen apart, and I was so surprised by my own overwhelming fear that I couldn't blame him for running.

There is an old joke about not having to outrun a bear, just having to outrun your hunting partner, but I've never had the heart to needle him with it.

Or maybe I just know that I would've run too, if my legs could have moved that fast...

A true personal story, by Griz Dozier