

Hunting Amidst Grizzlies: Always Respect the Bruin, and Remember Your Bear Spray

by Hal Herring

Field & Stream – November 16, 2011



*Photo: Karl Puckett
Hunter shoots charging griz in Badger-Two
Medicine area*

A Kalispell elk hunter shot and killed a charging grizzly bear in the Badger-Two Medicine Area of the Rocky Mountain Front on Wednesday. It was the third instance of hunters shooting grizzly bears in self defense on the Front — and at least the eighth in northwestern Montana — since big-game rifle hunting season began three weeks ago.

In an interview, Ben Laster, 28, described the shooting of the female grizzly as “the worst thing I’ve had to do in my life.”

I was hunting just east of the Scapegoat Wilderness boundary, about a week ago. In the half-light before dawn, the tracks in the snow on the game trail looked

like they might be human. As the light came up, though, it was clear that they were grizzly tracks, the improbably huge mitten-like print with the perfectly round toes, the frozen steep ground scored by the big diggers, like a badger print blown up, a badger from an old black and white Godzilla movie. Most of the tracks were blurred—there was more than one bear traveling here, and it looked like we were all going to the same place, a little pass about a mile and half off.

My friend and I had glassed a hundred head of elk over there the morning before, and some other hunters had gotten in on them in the afternoon, firing four times, so there were gutpiles somewhere. We had seen no bear tracks in here the day before. That day, they were everywhere. But I wanted to get into those elk real bad, and leave my own gutpile. I was not about to turn around because of a couple of bears. Or because I had left my bear spray crammed into my saddlebags...a mile away.

I know a lot of bear-humbled hunters who have probably felt the same way. We’re all gunfighters, quick on the trigger, sight picture perfect, until we actually hear the “huff!” and see the bear coming from ten yards out. How many times have we said it? “My .454 Casull (7mm Mag, 300 WSM, .338... etc. etc.) is my bear spray...”

We’ll say this even while we’re crawling through deadfall with our rifles on our

shoulder. We’ll say it even when our rifles are jammed in the scabbard, or when our pistols are in a belt holster that is covered by our thick wool jacket and wedged under our daypack, chafing the bloody Beelzebub out of our backside, as accessible as it would be if it were on the nightstand at home. I carry my .308 Safari-style, with a BooniePacker sling, and I practice a lot with my rifle. In my mind, I always come out on top in a confrontation with a grizzly bear. In real life, I’ve interviewed at least a dozen people who’ve been beat up by grizzly bears. Almost none gunned down the bear, and the most recent one who did—in the story linked above—felt terrible about it.

In September, in Idaho, a hunter killed his buddy while trying to shoot a grizzly off of him. I’ve interviewed a man who ran ‘round and ‘round a little burnt up fir tree with a bear right behind him (it got him), and a man who crawled over a steep ridge, rifle slung on his back, and looked a big sow right in the face (it got him). A bowhunter who was calling elk in the Gallatin Range and called up a sow and two giant yearlings instead, was caught, ragdolled ferociously, skull fractured, leg broken, and finally drew his sidearm only to find out, with a dislocated shoulder, he couldn’t raise it up or pull the trigger (his buddy used bear spray to run the bears off and save his life). And so on.

There’s a general consensus among those who’ve actually been attacked by bears, or almost attacked by bears, or

that spend a lot of time around bears, that bear spray is a real good thing. An eight-foot-wide cloud of choking, red-hot pepper vapor sprayed into the nasal passages of a giant beast that can smell a carcass 18 miles away offers a better percentage of success than a thumbnail sized chunk of copper and lead that may or may not ever get clear of the barrel before the fight starts.

And bear spray is just the right, non-lethal response, in a world that has just celebrated its 7 billionth human baby, where we've confined the last of the magnificent monstrous top level predators to the smallest slivers of the harshest lands. Who among us is so callous that, all other considerations aside, they would feel good about killing one of the last grizzlies in the last little corner of their once vast domain? No one that I want to hunt with.

Last week, when I got on that trail with those bears, I figured that in all that country, the chance of running into them was pretty small. I fought my way through a thicket of young lodgepole, jackstrawed with deadfall from the '88 fires, and finally came out in some open, unburned timber. Whew. About fifty feet away I noticed a little piece of orange flagging flickering in the freezing wind, which was in my face, just like I wanted it. I was still elk hunting until I stepped up on a big deadfall and looked at the flagging. It marked an elk carcass, and the hunters had packed out most of the meat. The bears had taken care of the rest. There was a big patch of blood blackened ground and numerous huge piles of bear scat, well-picked elk bones scattered, a rib cage smashed and sundered. I backed up until I couldn't back up any more. Eased out sideways, talking loudly.

Where was my bear spray, the bear spray that I had written about so many times, the bear spray that all my interviews had pounded into my head that I must carry, the bear spray that I so often told my fellow hunters that they must carry?

Yep, back in my saddle bags. I put my .308 to my shoulder (finger straight! safety on!) and I bashed my way along the edge of the open timber, wide-eyed. The smell of grizzly bear was strong, in short puffs and whiffs, coming from who-knows-where on a whipping, confused wind. I reached higher ground and relaxed. But there, right at my feet, one of the bears had dragged part of the carcass, or another carcass, and had literally torn it to pieces, defecating copiously all the while.

I never saw those bears. One of the guides that was hiking not far away did see them, from a glassing perch up high—two big grizzlies, out in the open, grazing along not 50 yards from a bachelor group of four bull elk. I lucked out, but I didn't deserve that luck. I crashed out of the thicket right into a carcass, like a clown. I didn't have my bear spray. If the bear had been on that carcass, I'd have been in trouble. Would I have tried to shoot a grizzly that was charging me? Yes. One of the effects of all my interviews is that I know how truly awful it is to get caught by an enraged grizzly bear (and how expensive it is to, say, fix a broken femur or stitch on a scalp). So I would have shot it if I could. But it would have been failure on my part, a failure of awareness, one of the key aspects of being a good hunter, and a failure of preparedness, the fundamental of traveling in wild places.

It has been my good fortune to be able to hunt some of the places that I dreamed of when I was younger, places like the Scapegoat Wilderness of Montana, one of the last places on earth where human beings are not quite at the top of the food chain. From Loma, Montana (where the Marias River meets the Missouri) where a grizz walkabout killed a sheep last year- 140 miles from the Rockies, to Key West, Florida, there's not another grizzly bear. From southern Idaho all the way to the high sierra along the Yaqui River in Mexico, where a shipment of 1080

predator poison from the US killed the last grizzlies in the 1970's, there's not another grizzly bear beyond the one printed on the state flag of California, where the last grizz was killed in 1924, and where the human population is now around 37.5 million souls.

There are an estimated 800-1,000 grizzlies left in the lower 48, and the fact that there are that many is among the greatest success stories of wildlife recovery and conservation on earth. If we ever want to see a hunting season on grizzlies, we have to try to stop killing them in conflicts over meat, or because we run into them by accident. (We covered some of the basic grizz cautions in the 2006 Field & Stream story "Surprise Attack!" and the advice we offered there still holds true.) I don't worry that non-hunting wildlife advocacy groups will someday try to restrict hunting big game in grizzly habitat, although I think someone will do that, if enough bears die from our self-defense shootings.

We'll fight any attempts to run us out of the wilderness, and we'll prevail. But we won't be 100% in the right, will we? We might walk around still saying 'My .308 is my bearspray,' even then, but it won't sound quite so good anymore, not when it's clear that top-notch woodsmanship- the kind once practiced by American frontiersmen traveling in Indian country - would make such self-defense killings rare, as would a fresh canister of bearspray for when that woodsmanship failed.

To have the opportunity to hunt this kind of intact, hyper-wild country, in this modern day, implies a profound responsibility, not to be careless in way that makes it necessary to kill these bears and leave the country less wild than we found it. A bluff charge turned by pepper spray leaves a live, educated bear, but there's not a hunter on earth who is going to wait and see whether they are facing a bluff or a full-out bite-your-face-off assault before

pulling the trigger on a rifle. To move carefully in grizz country, to carry bear spray where you can get at it in a millisecond- to try to minimize these conflicts - is to possess the very kind of respect for wildlife and wild places that we often talk about, the respect that is our heritage as hunters and can be our legacy.

I'm talking to myself here. I walked into the gutpile. My bear spray was in my saddlebags. My rifle was at my shoulder. I can do better.