

Bear encounters on the increase



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The other morning, as I was enjoying a very strong cup of coffee, I was having a glance at the outdoor blogs online and came across another bear encounter gone awry. This one was a story about a pair of men who saw a sow grizzly bear, without cubs, quietly minding her own business as she was eating something in the tall brush.

The plan hatched by these two men was to have one man sneak up on the bear and try to touch her, while the other made a video of the “encounter” on his phone. It did not go completely as planned but there was one heck of a video.

The man got a foot or so away from the bear, startled it, and caught a right cross from a paw of the big sow. He then was mauled for another 30 seconds as the bear did not really like being

snuck up on. The surviving videographer was going to name the video “This is what happened to my late friend,” but the coroner collected the phone and called it Exhibit A in the death investigation of homicide by bear.

I have noticed a real uptick on the bear encounters, not just in Colorado, but across North America. This uptick does not include the usual encounters of mind-boggling acts of idiocy, like the one above. Most of these encounters of recent vintage have been involving black bears.

A man named Billy Green, of Haw Creek, North Carolina, says he owes his life to his dog for saving him from a black bear attack. Bears are very common where Green lives, and he sees them on a regular basis around his home.

This summer morning, Green took his dogs outside. He noticed a bear, so he yelled to drive the bear away, as he usually does. The bear continued to approach Green and his two dogs, eventually going into a charge, pinning him between his car and the house.

Green’s puppy, Shayla, barked at the bear, startling it, and getting the bear to come after her, rather than Green. “When the bear came at me the first time, it was a foot away from me, she jumped, and when the bear jumped back it was try-



Most of the time, bear encounters are peaceful, but they seem to be on an uptick lately. (Photo courtesy of USFWS)

ing to swipe at her, but she got the bear down the bank,” said Green.

Colorado is no stranger to black bear encounters. During the summer of 1971, the first fatal bear attack of modern times occurred in Colorado near Grand Lake. A small group was camping on private property when a bear entered their camp and killed one of the people. Another woman was bitten on the back but survived to tell the story. The bear was finally driven away when one of the campers struck it in the face with a frying pan.

In Ouray, an elderly woman named Donna Munson had a habit of feeding bears dog food, fruit, and other assorted goodies from her back porch. She even built a wire cage behind her home where she fed the bears from.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife had warned Munson so many times against feeding these bears that she quit taking their calls, and eventually tried to legally ban them from entering on her property.

In the summer of 2009, one of the bears apparently did not like the dinner menu, and attacked Munson, and ate her. While it was sad news, it came as no surprise to anyone that the bears would one day turn mean.

In August of 1993, near Buena Vista, Colin McClelland shot a bear that had torn the door off his camper. Wounded and aggravated, the bear killed McClelland before he could get off another shot. Officials blamed a local drought causing the removal of normal food sources for inspiring the

bear to seek food elsewhere.

May of 2021 was the date of another fatal bear encounter, near Trimble, in La Plata County. A 39-year-old woman was on a walk with her dogs, when she was attacked by three bears, a grown female and two smaller bears. She was killed and partially eaten by the trio.

Colorado’s bears seem to be a bit bolder lately, walking trails, city streets, and even entering homes or restaurants in search of food. The reasons vary from region to region. Some areas are drought stricken, and the natural food sources, nuts and berries, and not available, causing bears to search elsewhere for food.

Near Steamboat Springs, bears seem to have lost their natural fear of humans. The same can be said of the bears in the Telluride area. Christy Bubenheim, of Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), says, “The bears feel empowered to break into homes, garages, and even restaurant patios more often than normal.”

Between 2015 and 2021, CPW euthanized 775 bears and captured and relocated another 402, according to data provided by CPW spokesman Jason Clay. In Steamboat Springs, people reported 1,042 bear “sightings and conflicts” during 2021 alone, compared to 804 in 2020. These sightings and encounters appear to be

increasing elsewhere also.

We need to coexist with bears and stop making it easy for them. Don’t feed them, harass, or otherwise try and interact with them. We don’t want to do anything to cause them to lose their fear of humans. Secure your trash, and don’t leave food accessible at home or in your camp. Close your garage doors, car doors, camper doors, and keep the bears out. No sense leaving an invitation for them.

There is no reason humans and bears can’t live together, if we use common sense. There was a time when I would have said you have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than having a fatal bear encounter. Let’s work together to keep the odds down and let the bears share Colorado with us. After all, they were here first.

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Summer heat and high hikes



Outdoors

By John T. Unger

It had been a high-altitude foot race, on an unusually warm morning that summer.

We had run a loop of several hours, under a cloudless sky. The course included a long section above timberline, and at the finish I had to quickly lie down.

Weakness, fatigue, thirst, nausea, dizziness and a headache confirmed my suspicion: I had heat exhaustion.

The hat I had worn and the water I had carried and consumed were inadequate for that race pace, at that temperature, up at that altitude. An hour later, after drinking proper fluids and placing bags of ice chips in my armpits and on my neck, most of those symptoms had disappeared.

I was then able to thank and dismiss my observer, and make my way home. I was a few hours older, and a lot wiser from the first hand

experience.

No one’s brain and nervous system can tolerate excess heat for long without suffering damage or, in extreme cases, threatening life itself.

After this year’s long, cool springtime, we are now officially into summer. Right in step with the calendar, our area’s nighttime and daytime temperatures are suddenly and consistently warmer by ten degrees Fahrenheit.

Knowing that none of us want to have to be putting handfuls of ice chips in our armpits, we can take action to avoid heat injury in the first place. Simple protective steps can be taken to make the next hike, ride, or high altitude trail run safe and satisfying.

Here are four factors which may determine whether we end up smiling at the finish line or grimacing in the medical tent ice bath.

Full sun is one factor. Especially with a sunny day like the one in the photo, we want to begin a hike or a run having fully hydrated each and every cell by drinking enough water the day before the outing. “Drink to thirst” is the standard, rather than counting ounces of our daily water intake.

When properly hydrated, our muscles and nerves work at their best. Mild dehydra-

tion is considered to be a loss of up to 2% of body weight during a workout.

Our muscular contractions, coordination, and stamina can show measurable worsening with as little as 1% dehydration. For those choosing a mountain footrace, for instance, that 1% translates into one runner finishing a hundred yards or so ahead of her less hydrated peer.

Thermoregulatory (heat control) functions also may begin to occur at this stage of water loss, which is equal to a 150 pound athlete missing a bike-bottle-and-a-half of his or her fluids. In addition, less well trained athletes are even more susceptible to heat injury than trained athletes.

Altitude’s effect is the second of these four factors. Every breath we exhale, particularly at altitude, removes moisture from our lungs. In addition, our heart is required to work harder than it does down in the valley, as the lessened air pressure requires more effort to draw in the oxygen needed.

Solar radiation is much more potent at higher altitudes too, so our skin absorbs more heat the higher we climb. One solution is to drink chilled (but not iced) water or diluted sports drinks, rather than neutral

temperature drinks. Sports science research shows that athletes can go longer before fatigue when using this approach.

Competitive events represent a third factor that may affect our hydration levels. The “warrior mentality” may increase the risk of heat injury, as documented by an expert panel including the American College of Sports Medicine. Trying to catch that runner just ahead, or to hold off the kick of the runner a minute behind, is a familiar feeling to anyone who has ever bounded across a starting line at the sound of the starter’s pistol.

Becoming a slave to one’s heart rate monitor belongs in this category. Objective judgment from between our own ears can be hard to muster in the adrenaline charged crowd at the starting line in a bike race or trail race.

Insulation is the fourth of these four factors. It includes both: 1) Body type and 2) Clothing choice. Some of us tend to resemble the physique of a Humpty Dumpty more than a Jack Sprat. Humpty may actually have more muscle mass than fat, but either way the metabolic heat generated within his or her core will be slowed from reaching the exterior surface of the skin and escaping.



Now hot Summer weather factors are beginning to replace our Spring hypothermia concerns from recent cold and high water in area rivers, as seen above where Roubideau Creek joins the Gunnison River. (John Unger/ Special to the MDP)

Jack Sprat, on the other hand, has a body without much fat or thick muscle to retain Jack’s body heat. That more classic distance runner’s build can easily deliver heat to the skin, where it can radiate away.

The downside of that build, however, is the tendency to chill too easily if a storm blows in and a cold rain soaks the athlete. Hypothermia then becomes a risk for them, even on a warm day, if they are not well prepared with carrying a rain jacket, hat, and water-wicking gloves.

(Recognizing this hazard, the Imogene Pass Run, for instance, insists that every runner start the race with all three of these items.)

Almost every athlete now knows to make use of non-cotton based clothing, such as polypropylene fabrics. In a surprise cold storm, we especially do not want cotton to be holding the sweat against our skin and thereby cooling us too much.

Is it going to be an especially hot summer season? Here it comes now.

John T. Unger is a Diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, and in 2022 achieved the credential of fellow of the Academy of Wilderness Medicine. He gets up early to try to be ahead of the thermometer’s rise. Your feedback and ideas for future columns are welcomed at www.sportsdocunger.com.

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