

The Grizzly Campsite Encounter ~ By Gord Anderson

This incident occurred on September 1st, 1994 while I was on a solo trip through the Rocky River district of Jasper National Park. Other than it being an early fall patrol, I don't recall the primary objective for the trip. While researching for this story I checked my journal from 1994 and unfortunately I was sketchy on details. My title at the time was Back-country Coordinator for the park. I more often rode along with the district warden for two person jobs or simply for mentoring when appropriate. This time, however, about a week following the Jasper Rodeo, in late August I had travelled alone up to Cairn Pass and laid over a few days before heading back through the Rocky.

Without doubt, the significant details I remember from this trip are my encounters with grizzlies as I saw more of them on this trip than any other in my career. Yonder and Waif had been my trusty partners for a couple of years by this time. I always rode Yonder which went against my usual M.O. because I always liked to rotate my horses to balance out their miles. However, whenever I tried to ride Waif she would buck me off. The last time [and another story] I suffered a fractured rib and it hurt to roll out in the morning for about six weeks. I wasn't keen to repeat that so Yonder who was a good fast walker got the job of packing me and Waif packed everything else.

Other than observing lots of bear and wolf sign, we'd had an uneventful trip as far as Cairn. At Cairn, we stayed on to enjoy the high basins and good weather in solitude for a few days before returning to the Rocky River. We headed out from Cairn Cabin and back to Rocky Forks on a high overcast morning. We had passed the horse/hiker camp and were above tree line when I spotted a sow grizzly with two cubs of the year checking out food sources along the trail in the last draw before the summit. We were still a fair distance from the bears and although she did appear to be aware of us she showed no concern. I lost sight of her behind some undulating terrain, so the ponies and I skirted far to the left and the long way around mama and her babies. As we reached the summit we were back on the trail but could see the bears slowly making their way up the trail behind us. On the Medicine Tent side, there is maybe two kilometers of trail before you are in the trees and out of sight of the pass. Should I mention, I rode side-saddle a lot watching for the bears and just before we got into the trees they ambled over the top into the Medicine Tent drainage. I couldn't resist looking over my shoulder for some distance. On the down valley side of the ancient rockslide we met a young French couple who could not help but meet up with the bears. They didn't have much for English language skills but I was able to explain what they should do. They must have survived their trip as we had no missing person advisories for the south boundary. At this point, I want to assure the reader that I was never paranoid about bears. I just made sure to be respectful and give them their space.

After a lay over day at Rocky Forks, the ponies and I continued on down river to Jacques Lake. We always stopped at Grizzly Cabin for lunch, a short rest and a look around before carrying on. About three kilometers down river from Grizzly Cabin the trail takes you up over the famous, and, to some, intimidating Grizzly Slump. This is a section of trail carved into the steep side hill that falls away sharply to the Rocky River approximately 75 meters below. The slope is very unstable in a couple sections and sometimes a horse may misstep and make their rider nervous. As the trail comes off the slump and just before you reach level ground you cross a noisy little stream and then maybe a hundred meters further is the Grizzly Campsite which is situated right on the edge of the fast flowing, noisy Rocky River. I've mentioned that Yonder was a good traveller [fast walker] however Waif wasn't. Rather than have my arm constantly yanked on, I always tied her off. So when she was 30 to 50 meters behind she would trot to catch up only to immediately give way to Yonder's steady ground eating pace. Considering all the jogging she carried her pack surprisingly well.

We were maybe 10 meters from the fire pit in the campsite when Yonder spun a 180 and in about three jumps almost collided with Waif, who was her usual 50 meters in the rear, before I managed to rein him in.

When Yonder was at about 75 degrees into his spin, I had noticed a patch of grizzled fur in my peripheral vision. . . Uh-oh, grizzly. . . Upon reaching a skidding stop at Waif's nose, I took stock of the situation. The horses quickly settled. Actually, I don't believe Waif knew what the fuss was about. I hadn't had time to panic over anything so with the horses being comfortable, I decided to proceed. We got around a few bends in the trail and we could see the bears spread out on the edge of the trail and two cubs nursing with mom laying on her back looking right at us. The horses never missed a step as she got up and disappeared around a corner of the trail with cubs at her side. Another couple of bends in the trail and the cubs were on her again but thankfully she just jumped up and disappeared around the next bend. This was when she emitted a sound that I had never heard from a bear prior to this. To me, it sounded like a pissed off cat. A very large cat. At this point of the trail, the terrain is relatively flat with the river flowing northerly on the right and a thick stand of scrub black spruce on the left. Just beyond the spruce is a sharp cutbank and the slope rises up from there. As we drew near to the spruce stand I could hear the sow complaining about our presence. Snapping of jaws and moaning. Through all this the horses never turned a hair and just kept on walking. I, however, talked to the bear, quietly reassuring her that we were just passing through and all was well. I couldn't see her through the thickness of those scrub spruce but I never took my eyes off the scene until we went around the next bend in the trail and then for about the next hour I kept glancing over my shoulder. That night, I entered my experience in the cabin logbook at Jacques Lake to add to the lore of the mighty grizzly's interaction with park wardens in the Rocky River.

In late October I rode through the district for the last trip of the year and I looked the sight over fairly closely in passing. I didn't stop and look but estimated the bears had to have been less than 30 meters away from the trail. Years later, in 2004, son Travis, daughter Rundi and I rode the Rocky the year after the big fire. That stand of spruce had been reduced to meager charred sticks. It was clear that the bears had been less than 20 meters from the trail as the ponies and I passed by..

In retrospect, I reckon the ponies and I were fortunate that the sow did not choose to do battle. She obviously did not hear us coming at the campsite over the noise of the river and the wind currents had to be in our favour. It seems apparent she had gone to the river for a drink and it was there that her babies demanded a snack at waters edge. I surmise that she was equally startled at the sight of Yonder as he was of her and thankfully, her reaction was to flee. So I had put my trust in my horses' behavior and I would say that they repaid that trust in spades. And in saying that, my belief is that the bear sensed that the horses posed no threat due to their calm behavior and all was well.