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The Misunderstood Bear

Even before Lewis and Clark provided the first scientific data about grizzly bears 200 years ago, legends about the “great white bear” abounded among early American explorers, pioneers, and settlers. Stories and tall tales about vicious, man-eating bears helped perpetuate the myth of the grizzly as a fierce and aggressive animal. While all wild animals can be dangerous if approached or threatened, human beings can safely coexist with these native species if we make an effort to understand the truth about their behavior and reactions.

MYTH: Bears are naturally aggressive towards humans.

TRUTH: Bears are normally shy, retiring creatures who only act aggressively as a last resort -- usually when they feel threatened. Bears very rarely exhibit predatory behavior towards humans. However, a bear that has been exposed to human food or garbage may become dangerous and aggressive towards people.

MYTH: A bear standing on its hind legs is preparing to charge.

TRUTH: A bear that is standing on its hind legs is usually trying to get a better view. This is not a threat or a signal that the bear is about to charge. Bears rarely attack, but when they do it is on all fours, with their heads down.

MYTH: If a bear huffs and growls, or slaps the ground, it is about to attack.

TRUTH: “Threat displays” such as snorting, salivating, snapping jaws, body posturing, etc. are meant to communicate dominance and scare you away. The bear is trying to avoid a fight.

MYTH: Once a bear charges, it is attacking.

TRUTH: Often a bear will “bluff charge” to scare you away, by veering off or stopping short at the last second. While bluff charge can be difficult to distinguish from a real charge, bluff charges usually occur with a hopping or bouncing motion, with the bear’s head up, legs stiff, and ears forward.

MYTH: The best way to get away from an aggressive bear is by running.

TRUTH: Running away will likely trigger a chase response, and you can’t outrun a bear. Bears can run as fast as a racehorse for short distances, and can run faster than the fastest human in any direction, including uphill.

MYTH: If you can, you should climb to escape from a grizzly bear.

TRUTH: A common misconception is that grizzly bears, unlike black bears, cannot climb trees. While its long claws make climbing more difficult for a grizzly than for a black bear, a grizzly *can* get to you in a tree – it will more likely, however, be able to reach you *before* you reach the tree.

MYTH: The best defense against a bear is a gun.

TRUTH: Research has shown that a mortally wounded bear usually lives long enough to seriously injure its attacker. People using guns against bears are more often attacked and more severely injured than those using pepper spray to defend themselves and deter the bear. While so-called “bear spray” cannot prevent an encounter with a bear, it is by far the best known method of preventing attack and injury, if an encounter occurs. Pepper spray is also non-toxic and will not permanently harm either the bear or the person exposed to it.