

Board of Review Recommendations

Recommendations of the Board of Review, based on the investigation of the fatality of Mr. Lance Crosby from a bear attack on Elephant Back Mountain, Yellowstone National Park on August 6, 2015

January 6, 2016

Board of Review Members¹:

Kate Wilmot, Grand Teton National Park, Bear Management Specialist, Moose, WY

Kevin Frey, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department, Bear Management Specialist, Bozeman, MT

Dan Tyers, USFS, Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Habitat Coordinator, Bozeman, MT

Mark Haroldson, USGS, Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, Bozeman, MT

Frank van Manen, USGS, Team Leader, Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, Bozeman, MT

Chris Servheen², USFWS, Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, Missoula, MT

Brian DeBolt, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Large Carnivore Conflict Coordinator, Lander, WY

Dan Thompson, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Large Carnivore Section Supervisor, Lander, WY

Dan Bjornlie, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Large Carnivore Biologist, Lander, WY

Kerry Gunther, Yellowstone National Park, Bear Management Biologist, Yellowstone National Park, WY

The unfortunate death of Mr. Lance Crosby highlights the importance of following recommended safety procedures when hiking in grizzly bear habitat. Increasing numbers and distribution of grizzly bears in the Yellowstone ecosystem increase the possibility of bear-human encounters. There is no guarantee of safety when hiking in bear country, even when all recommended safety procedures are followed. However, the BOR believes it is important to recognize that of the 6 human fatalities caused by grizzly bears in the Yellowstone ecosystem since 2010, 5 involved hikers. Of the 5 hiker fatalities, 4 involved solitary hikers none of whom carried bear spray. The other hiker fatality involved two hikers who were not carrying bear spray and who ran from a bear they encountered on a trail. The bear then chased the running hikers, killing one of them.

It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of hikers in Yellowstone National Park do not follow recommended safety procedures to reduce the risk of bear attacks. As stated in the BOR report, in a recent survey of 7,770 people day-hiking (2,669 groups) in

¹ Arranged in alphabetical order by agency affiliation.

² Chair

Yellowstone National Park, 60% of the hiking groups had fewer than the recommended party size of three people for hiking in bear country, and 14% were lone hikers. Of the 7,770 day-hikers surveyed, only 1,061 (13.6%) carried bear spray (Gunther et al. 2015).

Given that the majority of hikers still do not follow recommended safety procedures in bear habitat, despite intensive information and education programs by resource management agencies, the BOR members believe that it is important to restate the recommended procedures to reduce fatal encounters with grizzly bears. We believe that the recommended safety procedures for hiking in bear habitat can reduce the risk of injury or death due to bear encounters.

The recommended procedures for hikers in bear habitat to reduce the risk of a bear attack are:

- 1) **Be Vigilant** – Being vigilant for bears and bear sign (tracks, scat, feeding sites) can reduce the chances of stumbling onto a bear at a close distance, thereby reducing the risk of bear attack. Be especially vigilant if hiking off-trail. Bears may be more likely to respond aggressively in off-trail areas where they don't expect to encounter people. However, bears frequently use maintained trails and encounters may occur anywhere. The BOR encourages hikers to remain vigilant while hiking in all bear country.
- 2) **Carry Bear Spray** – Bear spray has proven to be effective at stopping aggressive bear behavior during surprise encounters when the person involved has time to deploy it. The public should be made aware of this fact and encouraged to carry bear spray and to be familiar with how to rapidly deploy it.
- 3) **Make Noise** – Making noise while hiking is an effective method of forewarning bears of your presence, thereby reducing the chances of surprise encounters and related attacks.
- 4) **Don't Run** – Running during an encounter can trigger a chase response in a bear. In addition, jogging in bear country increases the odds of surprise encounters at close distances and surprised bears are more likely to be aggressive.
- 5) **Do not Hike Alone** – Hiking in group sizes of 3 or more people or traveling by horseback is known to reduce the risks of bear attack. Larger groups are more intimidating to bears and more likely to have at least one member making noise or being vigilant, thereby reducing the risk of bear attack. Horses are more likely to smell, hear, or see a bear before a person does, reducing the likelihood of surprise encounters. Horses are also more intimidating to bears and if needed, unlike humans, are capable of outrunning and outmaneuvering bears.

The BOR acknowledges that Yellowstone National Park and all land and wildlife management agencies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem have extensive bear safety messaging programs. However, adherence to these safety practices is generally low, indicating that current messaging is not successful at changing peoples' actual behavior in bear country. The BOR encourages all land and wildlife management agencies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem to continue efforts to improve bear

safety information and education programs, with the goal of achieving greater adherence to these safety practices by all recreationalists and among day-hikers in particular who have a low level of compliance with bear safety procedures.

The BOR reiterates that there is no guarantee of safety when hiking in bear country and that these 5 bear safety procedures may not have changed the outcome of Mr. Crosby's encounter with a grizzly bear. However, the BOR believes that increased adherence to these safety practices in the future can reduce the frequency and severity of bear attacks on hikers.

Literature Cited

Gunther, K.A., E.G. Reinertson, T. Wyman, D. Bergun, N.R. Bowersock, A.M. Bramblett, E. Johnston, and J. Nicholson. 2015. Visitor Compliance with Bear Spray and Hiking Group Size in Yellowstone National Park. *Yellowstone Science* 23(2): 41-43.