



# Grizzlies in the North Cascades

## Unbearable to ponder or barely a concern

by Craig Romano, Guidebook author

Grizzly Bear. Photo by Steven Gnam

Like my first love, I'll never forget my first grizzly bear encounter. It was highly emotional and intense. Short-lived too, but forever etched into my mind. But unlike my first love, I wish to continue my relationship with grizzly bears into the future.

I've always been fascinated with and a little fearful of grizzlies, perhaps North America's most majestic, misunderstood, and maligned mammals. I grew up in New Hampshire, far from grizzly country. But, it's excellent black bear habitat. Throughout my youth and young adulthood I had countless encounters with black bears while hiking. Even while on a biking trip, there were numerous occasions when bears darted across the road in front of me. All of my black bear sightings were positive and I knew that bear attacks were rare as long as I wasn't stupid – and wasn't caught between mom and cubs.

On my second cross-North America bike trip, I was filled with excitement and anxiety, bicycling across the lonely roads of Alaska and the Yukon Territory. Taking advantage of long summer daylight and youthful exuberance, my cycling partner and I pedaled through the middle of the night in the land of the midnight sun. We were scared to death of seeing a grizzly – yet wished to see one. It never happened, and the bear whose scientific name includes "horribilis" continued to intrigue, fascinate and frighten me.

In the summer of 1986, I worked as a backcountry ranger in New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest. One of my co-workers had just returned from spending a season as a

backcountry ranger in Montana's Glacier National Park, which boasts one of the largest grizzly populations in the United States. He had seen many grizzlies in his patrols. And while he loved the backcountry in the Northeast's highest mountains, they didn't give him the adrenaline rush he got in Montana, where at any time *Ursus arctos horribilis* may be up ahead on the trail. To him, just the mere presence of grizzlies in the backcountry meant true wilderness – and pure excitement.

Five years later, I got to spend two weeks hiking in Glacier. And after years of both anticipating and fearing a grizzly encounter, I got my wish. I was hiking to Swiftcurrent Pass with my two brothers. We stopped at an open ridge to look for birds in the forested edge of an alpine meadow just below us. My brother Jeff "pished" for warblers, but what wobbled out of the forest was the cutest little grizzly cub. After a few seconds of admiration, reality set in. Where there's a cub, a sow is not far behind. Sure enough, Momma soon came out of the forest cover. The cub continued to wobble – but now it was toward us!

That's when nature kicked in. As I stood there on that open ridge watching in utter amazement a little cub coming toward me, my heart rate without any physical prompting began palpitating at a rate that I have only known after engaging in amorous activity and running competitions. I was fascinated by this primeval instinct for fight or flight. But, there's no way I'd ever fight a grizzly. And flight? Ha! The slowest grizzly could still beat Carl Lewis. I wasn't going anywhere! Time froze. Mom snorted for her cub to turn

back. I prayed to God that he would head back, too. Thanks to Divine providence or cub obedience, the little guy returned to Mama and they hastily retreated back into the forest.

I had just experienced one my most intense backcountry moments, ever. Grizzly encounters do that to you. They make you feel alive. When you hike in grizzly country, all of your senses are heightened. You're aware of every scent, sound, and sight around you. You're completely within the moment and feel completely alive! I have had several other grizzly encounters since that hike in Glacier. I had a similar cub and momma situation, while trail running with my wife, in Alberta's Jasper National Park. While being surrounded by dall sheep on a high open ridge in the Yukon Territory's Kluane National Park, I got to watch a big grizzly lumber across a hanging valley. I observed grizzlies searching for salmon in a river on the Alaska-British Columbia border. And watched from a canoe in Alberta's Waterton Lakes National Park a grizzly sow tear up a meadow looking for grubs. All of these experiences are among my most precious wildlife sightings.

But I don't need to see a grizzly while hiking in grizzly country to experience such intensity and excitement. When I hike in Northeastern Washington's Salmo-Priest Wilderness, it just feels wilder than other parts of the state. Why? Grizzly bears. The Selkirk Mountains of Washington's northeastern corner harbors one of the last viable grizzly bear populations in the Lower 48. I have never seen one here. But I have seen their signs. And last summer, just before I spent a couple of days traversing Sullivan Ridge and scrambling up Gypsy Peak, Eastern Washington's highest summit, US Fish and wildlife biologists had just tagged a 430-pound grizzly in the Priest River valley below.

Looking over the rounded ridges and craggy peaks bearing fire scars from decades ago and now draped in huckleberries and mountain ash, I could sense the presence of grizzlies. Just knowing they are out there gave me an incredible feeling of wildness - a feeling that there are parts of this vast continent still resembling what it was like before Lewis and Clark, David Thompson, and convoys of wagon trains traversed it. These are hallowed grounds—a landscape retaining one of its wildest and rarest components—a landscape that looks and feels like it has dodged the crowded and hurried modern era. And it is a threatened landscape—a shrinking part of our natural heritage.

Maybe that's why I support reintroducing grizzlies to the greater North Cascades ecosystem. While this ecosystem consists of some of the largest tracts of undisturbed wildlife habitat remaining in the Lower 48, a few of its key components are struggling to survive. One of only five areas in the Continental US that still supports grizzly bears, the North Cascades population consists of only a handful of individuals. The National Park Service announced this summer a three-year process to assess impacts and a range of alternatives to determine whether grizzly bears should be restored here. The U.S. Forest Service and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will be cooperating agencies in this study. Bellingham-based Conservation Northwest has been a lead supporter for decades for restoring grizzlies to the North Cascades, and they continue to support outreach programs educating the public about these beautiful creatures.

I know the thought of grizzlies in the North Cascades sends shivers down many a Northwest hiker's spine. And I know that many of my fellow hikers have no desire to hike in grizzly country

— even less so to encourage these bears to return to some of their favorite hiking grounds. But this fear is greatly overblown, fueled by pioneer tales, media sensationalism and some highly publicized past maulings. But the fact is that human encounters with grizzlies are rare. Human caused deaths from grizzly bears are extremely rare. Each year more people are mauled by black bears than grizzlies. More people die from snake bites and insect bites each year than from grizzlies over many years. Grizzly bears have been greatly maligned and misunderstood over the ages. They generally shy from human activity. They are an important component to a healthy North Cascades ecosystem. And whether they continue to be, hinges on our acceptance of them.

After a long absence, wolves, the call of the wild, are returning to the North Cascades. Hopefully the grizzly, the monarch of the mountains, will also find his way back home. But unlike the wolves, we may have to assist the bears. And unlike the wolves, the welcome mat has not been extended to them from most hikers.

I invite you to spend some time hiking in grizzly country. Experience for yourself what an ecosystem that supports grizzlies feels like. It feels like nothing else on the continent. With education, proper preparation and bear-aware hiking and camping techniques, you should have a safe and satisfying backcountry experience. The most dangerous thing about your trip to grizzly country, I assure you, is driving to the trailhead. Over 35,000 people died last year in automobile accidents, yet we don't shun the highways. Human deaths attributed to grizzly bears in 2013? Zero. Grizzlies killed by humans in 2013? Over 300 alone just in British Columbia. It would appear that grizzlies should be more afraid of us, than we of them.



Sign posted in Eastern Washington, Photo by Craig Romano