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By Steve Primm. Guest Columnist

Yellowstone Tragedy Shouldn't Lead to Paranoia

Grizzly bears can be dangerous. We get reminders of that here in the Rockies fairly regularly – people get injured, sometimes grievously, every year. And sometimes, grizzlies kill people, which is what apparently happened in the middle of Yellowstone last week.

We don't know any illuminating details yet: a man is dead, and evidence indicates that a grizzly killed him. It will be up to investigators to learn about what led to this tragedy. For the rest of us, there will be lessons to glean about how to live in this wild place.

From the bad old days of bears eating garbage in Glacier and Yellowstone on, bear-caused deaths spark a lot of discussion. The question that usually comes to the fore is, are bears attacking people more frequently?

We can look to statistics for insights. From 1980 through 2014 throughout North America, grizzly or brown bears killed 46 people. That's 1.34 fatalities annually, for all of the lower 48, Alaska, and Canada. If we look only at 2000 to present, grizzlies continent-wide killed 1.44 people annually. Looking back only the last 10 years (to August 2005), grizzly-caused fatalities show a minor increase over the long-term average, at 1.5 per year across the continent.

Zooming in to Greater Yellowstone, grizzlies have killed six people since spring 2010. Those deaths broke a relatively peaceful 23-year streak when grizzlies didn't kill anyone in or around Yellowstone. Naturally, some will view these recent tragedies as an alarming new trend. While we should all have respect in bear country, there are good reasons to resist grizzly hysteria.

First, the trend data for bear attacks on people do not show a steep increase. If we look only at the last five years, we fall for the mental error that statisticians call the "clustering illusion:" the tendency to see a non-random trend when we look at a very small subset of events. Looking at the long-term record, we see that there have been some very bad years (Glacier National Park saw three grizzly-caused fatalities in 1980 alone), and then quiet periods when no one got killed by grizzlies anywhere in North America for two or three years.

The second reason to reject alarmism is that these rates are holding steady, even while there has been substantial growth in bear populations, and increases in numbers of people playing, working, or living in grizzly country. Since 1990, the Yellowstone grizzly bear population has at least doubled. There are also roughly 800,000 more visitors to Yellowstone annually than in 1990. That's on top of 170,000 more people living in Greater Yellowstone in the same period.

Somehow, more grizzlies and far more people are sharing the country without a significant

uptick in fatalities. Instead of falling for “bear-anoia,” we should be asking why inter-species relations have remained relatively harmonious.

There are two factors that explain why we’re not seeing a significant increase in deadly attacks by grizzlies: First, wildlife managers have done an excellent job making the “garbage bear” a thing of the past. Bears that thought RV parks, towns, and remote camps were their pantries were exceptionally dangerous. From the late 1960s on, the agencies closed dumps, buttoned up garbage cans, and made backcountry camps off-limits to bears. Federal and state agencies, along with a wide range of partners, have sustained these programs through thick and thin.

Second, wildlife professionals, entrepreneurs, and educators have helped us all dramatically upgrade our own behavior in grizzly country. In the 30 years since Canadian Stephen Herrero wrote the seminal guide to avoiding bear attacks, we’ve gained a great deal of knowledge about safety amongst the great bears. Situational awareness, hiking in groups, and carrying bear pepper spray all add up to major reductions in risk.

None of this minimizes the sorrow of losing people to bear attacks. All we can do in the aftermath is grieve, and then make sense of what took place. One thing we can safely say about each of the people killed by grizzlies in recent years is that they, too, were drawn to this wild place. We owe it to them, to grizzlies, and to wild Yellowstone to accurately understand risk, and to learn from these tragic encounters.

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