

Bear Biology 101

with Wade Nolan

Play Dead Or Fight

Most of us in North America live within 100 miles of a black bear. For this reason I will focus on what the experts say about the proper action to take if confronted or attacked by a blackie. First I want to set the record straight about the relative risk of a black bear attack. It probably will not happen to you and you will probably never need this advice. But that does not stop us from learning CPR or First Aid and so I want to share with you the accepted strategy you should use if confronted by a black bear.

I remember Gary Alt, the noted Pennsylvania bear researcher, sitting at my kitchen table with me in Alaska and telling me how he had handled over 2,000 black bears without a single bear biting or ripping him. Indeed, in PA black bear attacks are as rare as eagle bites. But these bears are intensely hunted and understand the fear of man. When you get out into the backcountry a bit where bears only infrequently encounter people things can be different.

Back when I gave bear orientation talks to tourists in Alaska's Denali Park I would explain that it was unlikely that you would win an argument with an 800 pound grizzly and the best defense was to play dead. Statistics bear out this strategy. But black bear research has determined something completely different when it comes to the smaller blackie.

Bear researcher Stephen Herrero compiled records of 23 people killed in Alaska by black bears between 1900 and 1980. Predation appeared to be the motive in over 90% of the attacks. Bears treated people as prey. Only one of the deaths occurred in a park situation with a habituated bear. Another feature of the black bear attacks was that 93% of them occurred during the day. This contrasts with grizzly predation which occurs primarily at night.



Let us look at two lethal predatory black bear encounters as related to me by bear author Larry Kaniut. From Kaniut's book, *Some Bears Kill*. Bush pilot Stephen Routh stood a sturdy and healthy 6-foot, 2-inches at 195 pounds. He landed on floats at Cow Lake preparing to spend the night. His wife was in the passenger seat.

Upon exiting the plane he took the tail rope up the bank to look for a place to tie the plane off, and looked left then right to face a large black bear nose to nose. At this point it is important to realize that a large 32-foot wide wing span float plane with engine running and prop turning had landed here less than a minute before the attack began, yet the bear had waited.

When Stephen turned to run down the bank the bear wrapped his forelegs around him and they tumbled down the bank to the water's edge. The bear rapidly chewed his neck and ripped his clothes. Stephen thought about a weapon, his Buck knife, but did not have it. Stephen

chore. Chainsaws, winches and a good tow rope become very useful in certain situations.

A way to fixing flat tires will come in handy also. Most auto parts stores carry good tire repair kits. Add a battery-powered air pump or compressor to complete the fix-it kit. A small survival pack for remote travel also makes sense. A minimum of these items would be helpful in an emergency situation: matches, a few food items, a flashlight with extra batteries and a well-charged cell phone. And do not forget to leave an itinerary with someone at home. Give them a general idea of the hunting location and an estimated time of return.

Work Horse

My ATV, a tool like my truck or rifle, allows me to carry my gear a little further into the woods, beyond the limits of my truck or backpacking range. The ATV also helps haul heavier amounts of bait to sites located in remote, hard to get to areas. ATVs take hunters beyond the outer reaches of their usual hunting grounds. For this reason, hunters using ATVs should take a few extra precautions.

First of all, take it easy; do not turn a pleasant adventure into an endurance race. Drive slowly and enjoy the beauty of the woods. Remote four-wheel-

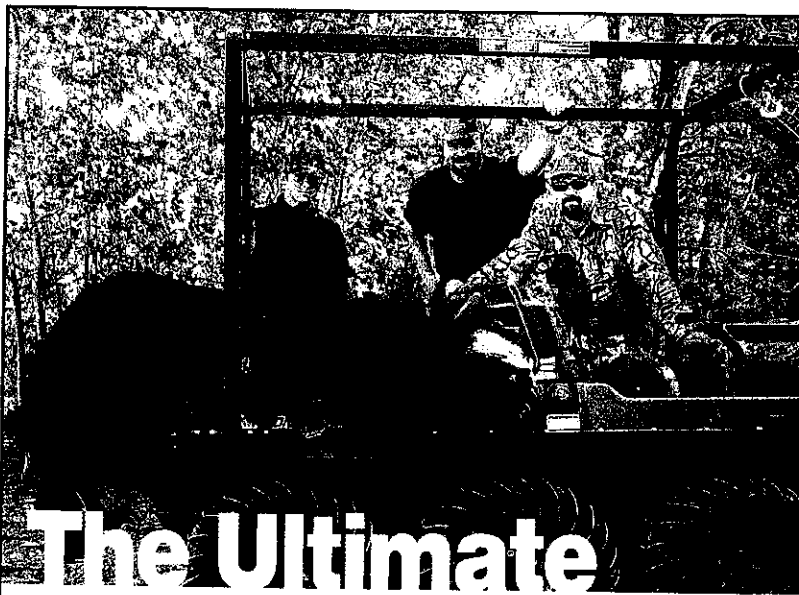
ing is not a time for racing and horsing around.

Become familiar with a compass or a GPS unit and topographic maps. ATVs allow hunters to travel much further into unknown territory, and knowing how to find a way out becomes very important.

Like any tool, ATVs must be maintained to perform properly. Keep it in good running order and things will go better when the ATV gets called into action. Having mechanical problems way back in the bear woods becomes a headache, especially in the middle of retrieving a trophy. A well-cared-for ATV will not spoil a successful hunt.

The last thing to talk about should be the first thing bear hunters must remember. Always get landowner permission before riding ATVs in the woods. Create a solid relationship with private landowners well before the season starts, making sure to let them know your plans for using the ATV. Contact state and federal offices when using public land controlled by these agencies. Most phone numbers can be found in a simple Internet search.

Most of all, have fun and enjoy the ride. Following the rules and advice of seasoned bear hunters that use ATVs in the bear woods can help turn the back-wrenching chore of retrieving a heavy bear into a pleasant task. 🐾



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