WAYNE C.
VAN ZWOLL

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

To Stop a Bear

You hunt in bear country. So what will you do about a bear about to do you in?

She saw her first grizzly from a helicopter during her third year of field mapping for the U.S.G.S. in Alaska's Yukon-Tanana upland. Though her team commonly split to work alone, 30-year-old Cynthia Dusel-Bacon carried no firearm. "Our supervisor said guns added more danger than they might prevent."

Post-war hunters hunted grizzlies with scoped bolt rifles, new cartridges more potent than the .30-06.

Quick, accurate pointing, with heavy bullets, makes carbines of modest power effective bear-stoppers.

Early on August 12, 1977, chopper pilot Ed Spencer delivered Cynthia to a ridge 60 miles out of Fairbanks. She wore a rucksack with lunch and a rock hammer, and a radio in an outside pocket. Pick-up would be eight miles down-country. Camp's radio, tended by Ed's wife, was 80 miles away.

A trail through the brush made walking easy. Cynthia stopped to chip a shard from an outcrop.

"A sudden crash in the bush startled me. I looked up and saw a black bear rise just 10 feet away." She yelled, waving her arms. The bear didn't move off; it came toward her, stealthily. Then it rushed her.

She was struck "a staggering blow" and thrown forward. Landing face-down, she willed herself not to move. But the bear didn't leave. It bit deep into her right shoulder and shook her. When it paused, Cynthia reached for her radio—futilely, with her pack on. The movement triggered another attack. "I was conscious of my flesh being torn, teeth against bone. I heard the bear's canines crunching on my skull."

The animal then grabbed Cynthia's arm and pulled her into the brush, periodically licking blood from her wounds. After "almost a half-hour," the bear paused. Cynthia got her left hand to the torn pack pocket and keyed the radio. "Ed! Come quick! I'm being eaten by a bear!" Then the beast pounced again.

Her call had reached camp, but when Ed arrived he couldn't see the prostrate woman in the brush. When he did spot her, he had to fetch help. Cynthia was strong, but she'd lose both arms in surgery. Her attitude pulled her back to health. "I want to keep working for the U.S.G.S."

From such tales spring nightmares. Bear attacks have long earned headlines; but only survivors can tell what happened, and in many reports the cause—even the bear species—remains unclear. A study completed by Canadian journalist Mike Cramond in 1980 put more than 250 attacks in his files, dating to 1929: "about as far back as reliable sources go." There are gaps in the records, he noted, primarily from parks. While grizzlies are widely thought much more dangerous than black bears, his data showed them in a close finish regarding attacks: 72 by wild black bears, 80 by wild grizzlies. Human fatality sums were similar too: 12 and 14. Half the remains of humans killed by bears of both species had been fed upon.

Bears attack to protect cubs or a carcass, also when surprised or when a human appears easy prey. Playing dead shows a bear you're no threat. But if an attack is predatory, it avails nothing.

Young, healthy animals like the bear that mauled Cynthia, and another black bear that killed three boys fishing an Ontario river in 1978, can be as dangerous as old, ailing loners soured on people. Paucity of berries, pine nuts or other food can produce problem bears, as can a flush of human traffic where bears have congregated. "In 1974 I had to destroy 51 black bears," recalled an Ontario wildlife agent. "In '77 I killed 17, in '78 just one." Conditions that cause bear encounters change seasonally and year to year. One evening, scouting for elk on a remote ridge, I came upon nine black bears at close range the last two hours of daylight. A bumper crop of berries had drawn them there.

There's no predicting where a bear will show up or what it will do. Hunters have been found with no signs of struggle, rifles unfired with safeties on, death apparently instantaneous. Cramond put hunters and people in tents at equal risk—about half that of hikers.

Since 1980, grizzly bears have increased in much of their Lower-48 range, as have hunter-grizzly encounters. A couple of years ago, hunting elk in Wyoming's Thorofare country, I was astonished to find bear traffic so heavy on main pack trails that in places grizzly prints

had erased all horse and mule tracks. Twice that week, guides in our group had to turn bears at close range. Not far away, a guide field-dressing an elk was killed by a grizzly. At the same time, strictures on food storage have denied bears a reason to raid wilderness camps. And bear spray has become popular with hunters.

"You have to be smart," Al Johnson told me. "I could have been smarter." In the fall of 1973, the Alaska Fish & Game biologist was on a mission to photograph moose in Mt. McKinley National Park. En route he spied a grizzly sow with three cubs. Al gathered up two cameras and his telephoto lenses and followed the bears on foot. For three hours he shot with a 1,000mm lens, maintaining a 100-yard buffer. As light faded, he decided to call the animals into range of a shorter lens. "I climbed 15 feet up a sturdy tree and squalled like a rabbit in distress. The cubs seemed curious; the sow paid no heed. But when I stopped calling, she approached at a fast walk, cubs well behind her."

When she got within 50 yards, Johnson yelled. She came on, faster now. Passing the tree, the sow struck at Al's pack. She stopped beyond it to let the cubs catch up. Al was now between the sow and her young. A cub looked up and bawled.

"I felt the tree shake violently [and] saw her head and shoulders...." The bear got high enough to grab Johnson's boot. She tore him from the tree. He shielded his head, enduring deep bites in his arms. "I turned stomach-to-ground and clasped the back of my neck. Her teeth scraped my skull. Then she left."

Al staggered 300 yards to a road. His luck held; a park employee with medical training happened by as if on cue. Before surgery in a Fairbanks hospital, Johnson got four pints of blood.

The first thing he might tell you about bears is to give them space. They can sprint fast (up to 45 mph), and even grizzlies can climb into branches as high as you're likely to pull your feet in a hurry. "The time to get away from a bear is before it detects you. Stopping a bear is hard; avoiding injury under a bear that doesn't like you is harder still."

Ordinarily, you won't carry a firearm in a national park. In Canada, handguns are *verboten* even where you can legally hunt. Other defenses may not seem very prickly to a bear. Evidence indicates bear spray is a viable deterrent. Like a bullet, however, it must be aimed. The grizzly that killed the guide over the elk carcass reportedly had spray residue on its chest when rangers shot it. Spray is for the face. A can is not as natural to the hand as a rifle or a handgun. In the stress of the moment—especially with cold fingers or gloves or after a bear reaches you—a can is easy to fumble. Bear spray is prohibited in most aircraft.

One advantage of spray over bullets: It's not lethal; you can use it without knowing if you must.

Ron Dube, an outfitter, who for decades took hunters into elk camps just east of Yellowstone, told me he'd never had to shoot a bear. "I've seen many, many grizzlies, some very close. One walked into a spike camp where I was alone, frying up supper. It wanted food. I yelled and acted as if I'd bite its head off if it didn't leave. It walked by my fire and kept going." Ron recalled only once being alarmed by bear behavior. "My client and I spied a big male grizzly pacing back and forth near a carcass. He was bristling, growling, clearly agitated though unaware of us. We backed off and hunted away from him."

I almost got into trouble once, during a late elk season. Deep snow near timberline had kept other hunters at bay, but each morning I saw fresh grizzly tracks. A bear was sharing my mountain. On my final afternoon, descending, I rested by a solitary pine at the foot of a slide. The elk carcass below caught my eye as a shadow flickered above. A grizzly, silvered hair rippling, bounded at speed downhill. Clouds of powder snow, backlit by low sun, enveloped the great creature at each leap. A fantastic sight.

Becoming part of that pine suddenly seemed imperative. Passing me, the big male bear stopped to nose the carcass 30 yards off, crosswind. Then he began batting the skull about, as might a cat with a ball of yarn. He came closer, an invisible hand reeling the skull toward me. Meeting my scent at 19 yards, he stiffened. Seconds passed. Then he melted into nearby timber. And paused. Putting the pine between us, I walked quietly away—though that path took me nearer the elk. *His* elk.

Running from a close encounter can trigger predator-prey response from bears that if given a loud shout would leave you alone. Best advice for hunters coming upon a carcass that shows bear traffic: back off slowly. A bear not evident may be nearby, watching its prize. Approaching game you've shot but had to trail, talk loudly; stop to look around.

Still, like meeting someone to whom you owe an apology, you may by chance bump into a bear.

Early one morning in 1965, Jack Turner left his rural Alaska home on the Atnarko River to repair a log fence. He carried an ax and, slung across his back, a Winchester 94 .30-30. Where the trail bent in a tiny glade, he met "the biggest grizzly I'd ever laid eyes on" 13 steps away. "Our eyes locked, and he was on the way, no warning growl or popping of teeth." Turner dropped the ax and whipped the carbine from his back. In one motion he levered a round into the barrel and flipped up the sight. "The bear was almost on me" when the bullet struck just over its nose, dropping the animal instantly. At the time, Jack Turner's grizzly matched the world's record

More black bears than deer here—a nod to traditional deer rounds like the .30 Rem. and .30-40 Krag.

score of a bear taken in 1954. Both now rank in 11th place.

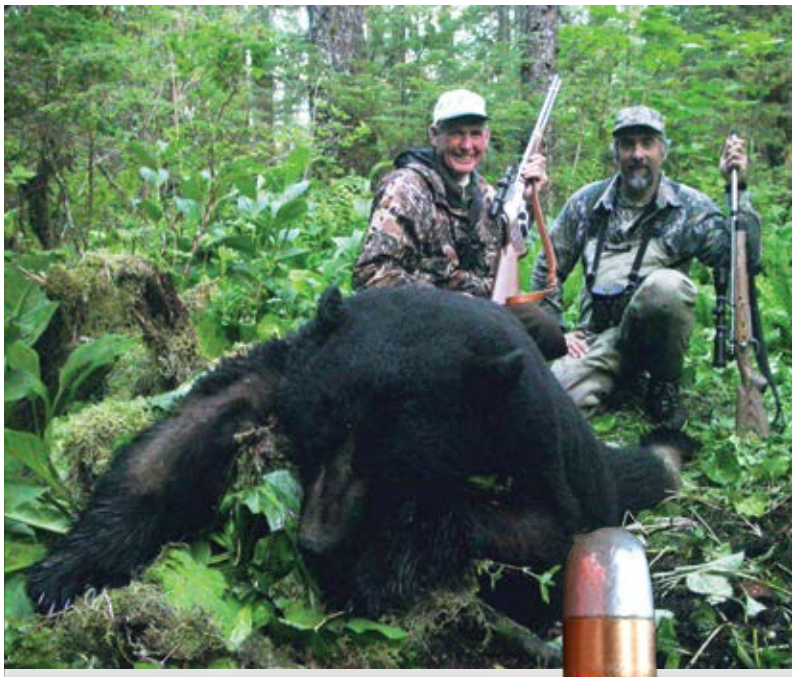
Killing with a head shot is commonly assumed. In truth, results differ. A hunter who fired four ill-aimed shots at a grizzly in B.C. was fumbling to reload when the bear, superficially hit, charged. "Shoot!" he yelled at his partner, filming the sequence from behind. The bear was a tornado furrowing the bush as the cameraman snatched up his .30-30. The bullet, fired at 20 feet, whined off her skull. So did a second softnose. A third, levered in with great haste, entered her eye. The bear slid to a stop at the fellow's feet. He leaped over the convulsing body and fired a fourth bullet into the brain.

Light wounds have turned bears, as has the clap of gunfire. Two deer hunters climbing through a tunnel of hemlock and salal, smelled fish and old flesh. A bear had eaten here. They emerged atop the rise, where the cover thinned. One glanced back—into the face of a black bear at tangle's edge. Instantly she came. Firing his .32-20 pump from the hip, he hit a forepaw. She rose, bellowing, flinging blood from the wound over his shirt. Four more shots, pell mell, struck the bear. She spun back into the jungle just as the other man tagged her with a bullet from his .303 British. Cautiously they followed the blood. She circled and died behind them.

While most hunters would now dismiss the likes of the .32-20 even for deer, a great many black bears and plenty of grizzlies have fallen to loads from the early days of smokeless powder. One shot from a .30-30 gave me a big Alaska black bear. An early convert to the .303 Savage counted two grizzlies with 18 animals claimed by his first 20 cartridges. Such ammo beats small, fast bullets with high chart energies but poor penetrating qualities.

These days, recommended cartridges for big bears pack at least the punch of 180-grain bullets in a standard .30-06 load—say, 2,700 foot-pounds. But many deer hunters in bear country carry rifles with lighter bullets that, even when velocity buoys energy, fail to impress grizzlies or even black bears. An exception: Hunters after Sitka blacktail deer sharing coastal Alaska with brown bears commonly tote frothy .30s and .338s. Bears have learned that

ABOVE: In brown bear cover, lever-action speed favored Winchester's 71, here re-barreled to .450 Alaskan. BELOW: Wayne killed this big Alaska black bear with one .30-30 bullet at 80 yards. Rifles trump handguns.



Winchester's 94 carbine in .30-30 and .32 Special was for decades a top pick for deer and black bears.

Hits with a .32-20 (left) turned a black bear. The .303 Savage killed even grizzlies at iron-sight range.

rifle fire signals fresh venison and come as if to a dinner bell.

"Stopping rifles" for dangerous game must drop an animal with a frontal hit, while most rifles are considered adequate if they kill humanely with a bullet through the forward ribs. Of course, it's the load, not the rifle, that matters. More important than chart energy is bullet weight, sectional density and design. Heavy bullets, long for their diameter and cohesive, best drive straight and deep through thick muscle and bone. For bears, bullets with mid-section dams (Nosler Partition, Swift A-Frame) or bonded cores (Nosler AccuBond, Federal Trophy Bonded), with some solid-copper hollow-points (Barnes TSX, Hornady GMX) make sense. So do heavy, hard-cast lead bullets in big-bore rounds like the .45-70 and .450 Marlin.

A rifle trumps a handgun every time, assuming it's in your hands. Bullet energy is much greater, and hitting vitals easier. Long ago a brown bear guide in Alaska told me clients commonly arrived with a .44 Magnum revolver as a back-up gun. "I tell 'em their back-up gun is my .375, that 4,200 foot-pounds is on the way to the right spot just when they need it. Bears pay attention to my rifle." He carried a S&W 29 too, as no one was backing *him*. One day he entered thick alders to retrieve a bear that by appearances had been fatally shot. His client waited behind. At mere feet, a mountain of bear hide erupted. It came on so fast he could only point and trigger the revolver. "I emptied that .44 into his ribs as, literally, he ran me over. Those bullets dumped a couple of tons. Didn't faze him. He blasted through the bush behind, falling dead a few yards on, probably from the rifle wound. He wasn't charging; he just wanted to get away."

A bear can endure terrific punishment and keep its wheels while running off.

Packing a mid- or large-frame revolver for an emergency, you should get decades of service from one cylinder of cartridges. Think: the fire extinguisher in your garage. Any shooting will be at very short range, the task not to kill the bear but to save yourself. The roundhouse blow needed to deter an agitated bear instantly with a torso hit comes at high a cost in handgun weight and kick. On the other hand, bullets that don't destroy the brain or forward spine must still help you out. The .357 Magnum is a fine and frisky cartridge, available now with bullets that will drop big bears. It's chambered in nimble mid-size revolvers. But it falls a tall step shy of matching the .41 and .44 Magnums, which, with 850 to 950 foot-pounds of smash, still send only half what you get from a .30-30 rifle. The powerful .454 Casull recoils sharply. Bullets like Garrett's hard-cast, and the Honey Badger from Black Hills, assure penetration no matter the bore.

At stopping distance, trajectory matters not. Neither does cost, as you needn't put bear-emergency ammo to pedestrian use. Lighter loads, even shorter cartridges (.38 Spl. in .357 revolvers, .44 Spl. in .44 Magnums, .45 Colt in .454 Casulls) spare you wrist-jarring slap as you perforate paper in practice. You'll train for fast, positive gun handling from the holster, and accurate double-action shots at speed.

Carrying handguns in bear country is often discouraged, and in many realms nixed, lest hunters use them prematurely, crippling or killing animals that pose no immediate threat. There's something to this. Bears can "false charge" to chase you off, or change their mind mid-stride and pass by. It happened to a compatriot, surprised from behind. He barely had time to draw his .357 and fire into the earth in front of an oncoming sow. She galloped by on one side, her yearling cub on the other. Did his bullet change the game? "Can't say," he shrugs. Given time for two shots, should you charitably send the first to ground? "Depends on how lucky you feel." Reading a bear's intent is difficult—nearly impossible if the animal is close and coming at speed. You have few heartbeats before contact, each an irretrievable chance to fire.

How fast you think and how wisely you decide often have more to do with what happens during a bear encounter than the hardware at hand. ■

Garrett offers heavy hard-cast bullets for big-bore handguns and rifles. They drive deep, crush bones.

Classic stoppers: The .375 H&H (left), 9.3x62 send hefty bullets with 3,500 to 4,500 ft-lbs of smash.