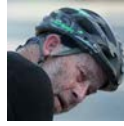


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# Craig Medred

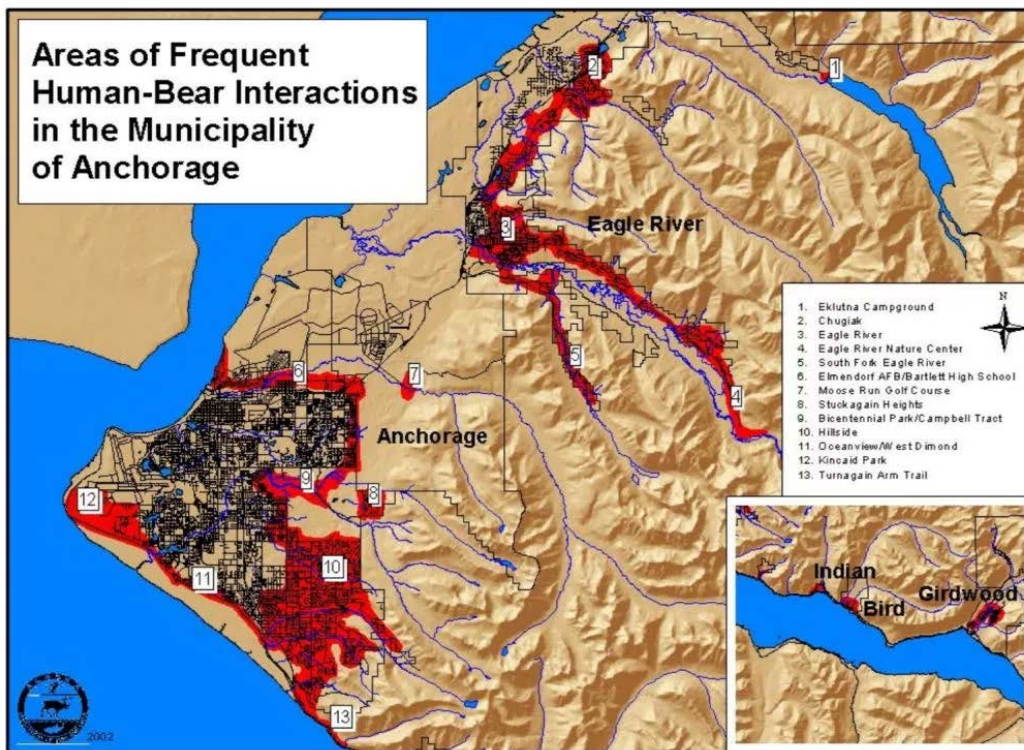
A HOME FOR READERS AND THINKERS

MONDAY, MAY 22ND, 2017

NEWS

## Life with bears

BY CRAIGMEDRED ON MAY 22, 2017 • ( LEAVE A COMMENT )



When it's spring time in Alaska, the bears come out, and if you live on the Hillside above the state's largest city your day might just start with an email like this from a neighbor:

“We met our first brown bear today. It was at the east end of the middle trail less than 50 yards away. It totally ignored us. I don't think this one was big enough to be making the tracks that I have been seeing at the creek crossing.”

That would be “brown bear” as in grizzly as in *Ursus arctos horribilis*, a horribilissly misleading name except on those rare occasions when it is all too accurate.

As a general rule, bears try to avoid people. If they didn't, the Hillside area on the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's map of areas of frequent human-bear interactions (see above) wouldn't just be colored red, it would be colored blood-red.

A grizzly can do a lot of damage to a human in a matter of seconds. Grizzlies started 2016 doing a lot of damage. By this time last year, there were two people in the Anchorage hospital with serious injuries.

The first was 77-year-old bear hunter Glenn Bohn from Wasilla (<https://craigmedred.news/2016/04/18/two-bear-attacks-today/>) who found himself the hunted along the Denali Highway in mid April. A grizzly jumped him and tried to tear off his face. He was saved by his son, who shot and killed the bear while it was savaging Bohn.

The bear scalped the old man. Photos of him taken after the attack were truly horrific, but recent photos indicate doctors did a miraculous job of putting him back together and friends say he has fully recovered.

Only days after the attack on Bohn in the Interior, University of Alaska Southeast wilderness instructor Forest Wagner was jumped by a bear while leading a ski trip near Haines at the head of the Alaska Panhandle.

The 35-year-old assistant professor at UAS in Juneau was seriously injured. Wagner, for reasons that are unclear, has never said much about what happened or the extent of his injuries, but the [university last summer reported he had undergone 10 surgeries](http://www.uas.alaska.edu/pr/archive-files/2016/160706-forest-wagner.html) (<http://www.uas.alaska.edu/pr/archive-files/2016/160706-forest-wagner.html>) and a photograph with a university press release showed him with a cane.

## A quiet year

All of the early 2016 attacks happened far from Alaska's urban core clustered around the head of Cook Inlet, but reports of bear attacks spawn a palpable fear that quickly floods the 49th state.

[Motor vehicle accidents killed 84 people in Alaska in 2016](http://www.nsc.org/NewsDocuments/2017/12-month-estimates.pdf) (<http://www.nsc.org/NewsDocuments/2017/12-month-estimates.pdf>) – a 29 percent increase from the 65 in 2015 – but no one thought twice about getting into a car, truck or van to drive wherever they happen to want to drive.

## [Bears killed no one in Alaska in 2016](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fatal_bear_attacks_in_North_America#2010s)

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_fatal\\_bear\\_attacks\\_in\\_North\\_America#2010s](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fatal_bear_attacks_in_North_America#2010s))– in fact there hasn't been a bear fatality in the state since 2013 – but the series of high-profile attacks last year left more than a few people afraid to go in the woods.

Not that some concern isn't warranted. Bears are potentially dangerous animals, and being killed by a bear is not a good way to go.

“Bears don't kill; they eat,” the biologist John Hechtel once observed.

The good news is that they seldom eat people.

When scientists Tom Smith and Stephen Herrero, authorities on bears, compiled “A Brief Summary of Bear-Human Interactions in Alaska: 1883-2014,” they found 647 reported cases of attacks on humans by grizzly, black or polar bears, and in more than half of those cases there were no serious injuries.

Only about 50 people – or an average of about one every two and a half years – have been killed by bears in Alaska in the past 125 years. The statistical reality is that bears aren't as dangerous as the hype that surrounds them and yet....

## Don't go in the woods

Only weeks ago, Rick Sinnott, the former Anchorage-area wildlife biologist, was trying to put the fear of bears into local mountain bikers.

“Maulings are rare, and the chances of being injured or killed by a bear while riding a bike are slim,” **he wrote in the Alaska Dispatch News.** (<https://www.adn.com/outdoors-adventure/2017/04/23/when-bikers-collide-with-bears/>) “But in several ways, biking increases your odds of injury in the unlikely event you encounter a bear at close range. And with bears just emerging from hibernation, Alaskans should pay heed.”

He went on to make much of 18 incidents since 2000 and one high-profile fatality involving a Forest Service law-enforcement officer who hit a grizzly while riding his mountain bike.

Statistics on cyclists killed by motor vehicles from 2000 through 2016 are not readily available, but more than 7,000 cyclists were killed by motor vehicles between 2000 and 2009 alone. Motor vehicles have been killing cyclists on roads and bike paths annually at the rate of 630 to 786 per year since the beginning of the new millennium, **according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.**

(<https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/811386>)

The data would indicate a rational person would spend more time worrying about the roads than the woods, no matter what critters live in the woods. But it doesn't work that way.

Humans aren't always rational.

There are residents of the Anchorage Hillside who will literally lock themselves in their homes for the next four months for fear of running into bears. And you can run into bears anywhere in Alaska.

**Here's one in downtown Anchorage.**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbtSCSS8oBY>)**Here's a map tracking radio-collared bears running everywhere around the edges of the city.** (<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.anchorageurbanbearsstorymap>)

So what is one to do?

## Accepting reality

**Number one:** Recognize that even if you're a total bozo who wanders around in thick, brushy bear-filled woods with earphones on your head, the odds of being attacked by a bear, let alone killed, are extremely low.

Timothy Treadwell, a self-professed “bear whisperer,” spent 13 summers in Katmai National Park and Preserve playing dangerous games with wild grizzly bears. He got between sows and cubs. He petted bears. He kissed bears. He almost begged for a bear to kill him and eventually one did, but it took a long time.

**Number two:** Realize the value of situational awareness. If you walk into an area with a lot of bear sign – multiple piles of bear scat, half-eaten fish, the neighbor's scattered garbage, God forbid a moose cache – be alert for bears and thinking about what to do if you meet one. If you don't know what bear sign is, [go read here](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.bearcountry). (<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.bearcountry>)

**Number three:** If you hike in wild areas in and around Anchorage, or live on the Hillside or in parts of East Anchorage abutting wildland or near Chugach State Park lands in Eagle River, learn how to use bear spray and get in the habit of carrying it. It's an effective and easy-to-carry bear deterrent. You may never have to spray it at a bear, an attacking dog, or a belligerent moose on which it also works in an emergency. But better to have it and never use it than to need it and not have it.

**Number four:** Find yourself some hiking, biking or walking companions. There is well documented safety in numbers around bears. Groups of people who get together and act big can almost always drive off a bear as a group of unarmed



people did in Denali National Park and Preserve last year.

Here's their example of what to do.

(<https://craigmedred.news/2016/07/11/denali-hikers-escape-bear/>)

**Number five:** Study. There are all sorts of organizations offering free, online advice on how to deal with bears. Here's the **National Park Service**.

(<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bears/safety.htm>) Here's the **U.S. Forest Service**.

(<https://www.fs.fed.us/visit/know-before-you-go/bears>) Here's

the **Alaska Department of Fish and Game**

(<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.main>). Here's

**Parks Canada** ([https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/mtn/ours-bears/securite-](https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/mtn/ours-bears/securite-safety/ours-humains-bears-people)

[safety/ours-humains-bears-people](https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/mtn/ours-bears/securite-safety/ours-humains-bears-people)). There are more out there if you want to look. They offer a lot of the same advice and some a little different.

Read and think about all of it, because what most of the guides fail to spell out is that many bear encounters – if you should fail to see the trouble ahead and simply avoid the bear – are a dance. You are not the only one making decisions. The bear is also making decisions.

The neighbor at the start of this story judged the bear wasn't interested in her or her dogs, so she just kept on motoring as if she and her dogs weren't interested in the bear. There was no problem.

Over the course of an Alaska summer, judging from state bear biologist Sean Farley's radio-tracking data, there are likely hundreds of encounters like this that people don't even notice. Farley regularly had bears bedding down not far from the heavily traveled Tour of Anchorage trail in Far North Bicentennial Park.

They were not there because they like us. They were there for the fish.

The bears are not our friends, and though you may think that “if I’m nice to the bears, the bears will be nice to me,” they don’t give a rip. They generally just want to avoid trouble, and that means they will generally avoid you.

And, if they don’t, it’s probably a good idea to know how to handle that situation, but even if you don’t, it’s likely to turn out OK because what the statistics would indicate is that you have to be really, really, really unlucky to get hurt by a bear.



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