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Pistols for Defense against Bears? Failures are Rare

by *Dean Weingarten*



Arizona -([Ammoland.com](#))- While discussing bear attacks, a consistent refrain is that pistols are useless as a way to defend yourself against bears.

In discussion groups, nay sayers claim that pistols are difficult to use, of insufficient power, and there are numerous instances where people who attempted to use pistols to defend against bears are badly mauled.

I have read of numerous cases where people used pistols to successfully defend against bears, so I asked one poster to give some examples where pistol defenses failed.

The exchange [occurred on freerepublic.com](#):






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"Actually, there are legions of people who have been badly mauled after using a handgun on a bear. Even some of the vaunted magnums."

OK, give us a few examples. As you claim "legions," it should not be too hard.

I never received a response. I believe the claim was made in good faith. Posters on freerepublic are known for their honesty and courtesy... or it might be the site's moderators. There has been a plethora of fantasy, fiction, mythology, and electrons sprayed about the inefficacy of pistols used on bears. It takes some serious digging to separate fact from fiction.

I have been engaged in a search for instances where a pistol was used to defend against bears. I and my associates have found 29 instances that are fairly easily confirmed on the Internet. The earliest happened in 1987, the latest mere months ago. The are heavily weighted toward the present, as the ability to publish and search for these incidents has increased, along with increases in bear and human populations, and the carry of pistols.

The 29 cases include one that can fairly be described as a "failure".

The pistol calibers, when known, range from 9 mm to .454 Casull. The most common are .44 magnums. Here are the cases, in chronological order:

1. MT: Grizzly Bear Killed After Biting Warden in Montana Forest June 26, 1987, .357 Magnum

[Pictures at Field and Stream Article here](#)

"I wouldn't want to have another go-round," the 60-year-warden, Lou Kis, said from his hospital bed after undergoing surgery for the bite, which was so powerful that it broke the leg bone below the knee.

Mr. Kris, a warden captain here for 22 years, killed the 400- to 500-pound bear with six shots from his .357 caliber Magnum revolver as it bit him.

2. AZ. 44 Mag used to stop bear attack Arizona Republic from Phoenix, Arizona · Page 39 – Newspapers.com (July 1996)

[Comprehensive article from Gun Watch published in 2017](#)

Jul 28, 1996 – The 16-year-old counselor, Anna – *Knochel*, was in critical condition. Brett Kramer drove off the 340-pound male bear by shooting it twice with a .44 Magnum pistol.

3. Alaska, Russian River, Grizzly Charged Fishermen, 9mm 17 August, 2002

But then the bear turned, looked up at Brenner and lunged, said Lewis, who interviewed the three men Saturday.

Brenner fired twice at the center of the hulking shape closing to four or five feet away. The sow, estimated at 400 to 450 pounds, went down. Brenner then put three more bullets into her head.

He used a 9 mm semiautomatic pistol. Lewis said such a low-caliber gun ordinarily doesn't pack enough punch to kill a bear. But Brenner loaded the pistol with full-metal-jacket bullets that penetrated to the bear's vital organs, he said.

4. Muldoon Alaska, Hiker Kills Charging Brown Bear from 20 feet with .44 Magnum,

[Original story from Anchorage Daily News](#)

"I fired the first shot, and I aimed at its shoulders. When the first shot didn't faze it, I fired the second time, and it turned into the ditch, and I shot three more times, and it went down," said Boyd.

Boyd was down to one remaining bullet in his .44-caliber Magnum when he called Anchorage police for assistance. State trooper Kim Babcock helped Boyd finish off the bear with her shotgun.

5. Black Bear broke into Anchorage home, AK Glock .40 , 2 June, 2006

A large black bear broke into an Anchorage home early this morning, rummaged around like a burglar and feasted on a box of chocolates before the homeowner shot him dead with a Glock.

(snip)

Knowlton said the bear started back up the stairs toward his son. He shot the animal multiple times and it went back downstairs.

6. From bozemandailychronicle.com: October 6, 2007 MT (Tom Miner Basin), .44 Magnum

It attacked a pair of bow hunters early Saturday afternoon. One of them used bear pepper spray and halted a charge within nine feet, but the grizzly turned and charged a second time. That's when the second hunter shot it twice with a .44 magnum pistol.

7. On the same day, another bear attack (Tom Miner Basin) and pistol defense of Roman Morris From mtstandard.com: October 6, 2007

"It charged down the hill and just drilled me," said Morris, 21, of Whitewater.

Over the next 30 to 45 seconds, Morris fought with the bear as it bit and clawed, severed his left hamstring, punctured his shoulder, chomped at his head and tossed him around.

"I thought the whole time, This is so messed up. I'm going to die, I'm going to die," said Morris, a pre-med major.

The bear ran off after a friend fired a pistol. Morris underwent surgery at a Livingston hospital and was recuperating Monday at his brother's house in Helena.

8. Wyoming, Flying H Ranch, Bowhunters Attacked by 600 lb Grizzly, Stopped Charge with .44 Magnum November, 2007

Byrum started to pull his .44 Magnum pistol out of his holster. After bumping into Byrum, Hambelton dove to the ground and curled into a ball, with his backpack facing the bear.

"I just gritted my teeth expecting the bear to bite me," Hambelton said.

With the bear closing to within six feet, Byrum fired a shot into the bear's neck.

"I kept telling myself, don't shoot in the head," said Byrum, fearful that a bullet to the head would glance off the bear's skull.

As the pistol fired, Byrum tripped over a tree stump behind him. With Byrum on his back, the bear fell in front of his hunting boots.

"I thought, 'Oh no, this is going to be bad,'" said Byrum, who could see smoke coming out of the bear's fur where he had shot him.

9. Grizzly shot with 9 rounds of .45 from a Glock 21 from gunnerforum.org reported August 22, 2009

There was not much news coverage of my friend's incident up on his place in Marias pass area here in Montana. The proper agencies investigated and found him to have defended himself against this 400 lbs sow grizzly with 2 cubs.

Roy was up on the edge of his property tending his fence line, when out of the brush she was coming straight at him with her ears back. Roy drew and put 3 rounds of 230-gr FMJ in her neck shoulder area, then took off away from the trail about 5 yards. Roy said the bear was still coming at him, and he fired 3 more rounds into her frontal area. And again took off another 5 yards off in another direction. The sow continued to follow coming at him, so Roy fired 3 more rounds into her frontal area and she dropped taking a dirt nap.

Roy called to report the incident, and they came out and brought a metal detector to locate spent extracted shell casings. Roy was found acting within his right to protect himself against the grizzly bear attack. But they said, they wished he would have used Counter Assault Bear Spray. Roy did not have any, so they gave him a can, plus some 12 ga cracker shells, and some other 12 ga shells will rubber bullets in them.

Roy came into town and purchased a Glock 20 10mm auto now.

I'm glad Roy is okay.

10. AK, Kenai Peninsula, Charging Brown Bear Stopped with Ruger .454 Casull, 2 August, 2009

Because of many bear-related incidents in this area, Brush always has brown bears on his mind...even when walking a well-maintained road. On just such a road, less than 500 yards from his house, Brush stopped when he heard a twig snap behind him. Turning his head toward the sound, Brush saw a monstrous brown bear charging toward him. "There was no warning," he stresses. "None of the classic teeth-popping or woofing, raising up on hind legs, or bluff-charging that you read about. When I spotted him he was within 15 yards, his head down and his ears pinned back. He was coming like a freight train...in total chase-mode."

Brush instinctively back-pedaled to avoid the charge, drawing the Ruger from its holster. "I fired from the hip as he closed the distance," Brush recalls. "I know I missed the first shot, but I clearly hit him after that. I believe I fired four or five shots. "

Brush finally fell on his back on the edge of the road. Miraculously, the bear collapsed a mere five feet from his boot soles, leaving claw marks in the road where Brush had--only seconds before--been standing. The bear was moaning, his huge head still moving, as Brush aimed the Ruger to fire a finishing shot. "By then my gun had jammed," Greg says. "I frantically called my wife on my cell phone and told her to bring a rifle. When she arrived I finished the bear."

11. AK, Denali National Park: Backpacker Stops Grizzly attack with .45 pistol, May 28, 2010

*A grizzly bear that emerged from a thicket and charged two backpackers in the backcountry of **Denali National Park and Preserve** was shot and killed by one of the two who was carrying a .45-caliber semi-automatic pistol, according to park officials.*

The killing Friday is believed to be the first instance of a hiker killing a grizzly in the park's wilderness. The killing occurred in the original Mount McKinley National Park portion of the Denali, which was expanded by two-thirds in 1980.

12. British Columbia: A Grizzly Bear, a .44 magnum, and a brush with death June 2010

[Link to video on Youtube](#)

He kept one hand on the tripod and drew the other to his holster, pulling out the gun he'd never had to use. The grizzly zigzagged toward him, roaring the whole time.

Mr. Lorenz lifted the gun and set it off, just four feet above her head. The shot was enough to startle the bear and make her turn in the opposite direction.

"This was something that she wasn't expecting, to get blasted in the face; that was enough to put a damper on killing me," he said. "If I didn't have the gun, I would have been dead."

13. Wyoming, Paint Creek, Shoshone National Forest, Bow hunter shot Charging Grizzly with .44 magnum, 2010

Paint Creek reenactment

A bow hunter reenacts for investigators how he fired a .44 Magnum revolver at a grizzly bear near Paint Creek in the Shoshone National Forest in 2010. Investigators followed a blood trail for half a mile, but could not locate the wounded bruin.

14. Zanesville Ohio, escaped bear, duty pistol, 20 October, 2011 .40 caliber (from Muskingum County Sheriff's Office)

But soon, he was facing another, much larger, problem. His commanding officer told him a lion had been cornered back at the Thompson home. He headed back, but instead of finding a lion, he was confronted by an angry bear.

"The black bear turned in my direction and ran directly towards me," Merry told ABC News. "I fortunately was able to pull my duty pistol, fired one shot, killing the animal instantly. The black bear fell approximately seven feet in front of me."

(snip)

Fred Polk watched in disbelief as he watched the bear charge Merry and a lion leap over a fence into his yard about 5 p.m. Tuesday night.

"One of the bears charged the deputy and the deputy shot it. After that one of the lions jumped the fence come down here and the deputy shot it in my front yard," Polk said.

15. From sikasentinel.com: 2012, 7 August, Lisa Creek, Alaska .44 magnum

About a mile in, when they stepped out of the thick brush and down a bank to cross the creek, they startled a bear sow that was about 20 yards away. Her two cubs, which were farther upstream, scattered.

"We immediately found ourselves in a confrontation," Kluting said. "She ended up turning around and for a split second we thought she would leave – but then she turned back and came at us full charge."

Kluting fired off a warning shot into the creek. At that point the sow was 15 yards away.

"She ran through that without even flinching," he said.

So Kluting aimed in the middle of the brown blur, now about 3 yards away.

"I barely had time to get the hammer back for another shot before she reached me," he said.

She collapsed in the river about 5 feet – two steps – away from them.

The bear was twitching, and Kluting shot her two more times in the shoulder to make sure she was down. He wasn't exactly sure where his first shot had landed.

16. Thorofare Country south of Yellowstone, Grizzly at 10 feet, .44 magnum and .357 magnum, September, 2013 (report from 2015)

Then at about 2:45 p.m., a collared boar grizzly identified as bear No. 764 came uncomfortably close. The group's canister of bear spray was in a backpack by their horses. A warning shot went off, but the big grizzly didn't turn back. "The bear stood up and growled, like something you would see in a movie," an eyewitness later told investigators. From less than 10 feet away, the guide and camp worker drew their .44 and .357 magnum revolvers and together fired four times, ending the 17-year-old bear's life.

17. AK: .45 vs 9-Foot Brown Bear (July, 2014), .45 semi-auto

Many people claim that handguns are useless for protection against bears. Numerous examples have shown that this is a false notion. Handguns may not be ideal as defensive weapons for bears, but they can be effective. In a defensive situation, you have to use what is available. In this case, a homeowner in Alaska used a .45 against a brown bear that was trying to get into his house on July 7th of this year. He and his son were in the home. He had scared off the animal with some warning shots just three hours before.

18. Glacier National Park: Bear first sprayed, then shot with a .357 (July 2014)

Murphy first sprayed bear spray at the bear when it was 15 to 25 feet away, firing one shot from his .357 revolver when the bear had approached to within 7-10 feet. The bear was charging uphill at the time. He only fired one round at the bear, which fell back and stopped moving when shot. Many have suggested that he should have continued firing, but it is hard to argue with success.

19. Massachusetts: Handgun Defense against Black Bear (Nov 2014)

*WEST SPRINGFIELD – A Sikes Avenue man **shot and killed a black bear** with single pistol-shot to the head Friday night after it started to go after his small dog, police said.*

20. AK: Details on Charging Kodiak stopped with a .44 Mag Revolver (July 2015)

The bear was roughly 9 feet tall and started its charge at about 20 yards away. The man shot the bear by the time it moved half that distance, Svoboda said.

"It all happened in really tight quarters," he said. "He shot at it five times before it finally stopped and then once it was on the ground, it was still moving. So he shot it one more time and then it died."

21. Grand Teton National Park: Fisherman fires warning shots with .44 Magnum, Deters Bear Attack, August 15, 2015

According to the angler's report, he was fishing when he heard a noise behind him. He turned around to see three grizzly bears, one adult and two cubs, coming toward him. The adult bear stood on its hind legs, at which point the fisherman fired one shot into the ground to the side of the bear. The bears then turned around and departed the area. The fisherman noted that he was near the "worm hole" area of the Snake River located approximately three quarters of a mile downriver from the Jackson Lake Dam.

22. Idaho: Bear Attacked Bow Hunter, Could not Reach Bear Spray, Drove off Bear with .44 Magnum pistol shots, 31 August, 2015

The hunter reportedly was carrying bear spray, but apparently couldn't access it when the attack occurred. Fish and Game officials said the man was able to scare the bear off after he tried to shoot her several times with a .44 magnum revolver pistol at point-blank range.

The archer sustained injuries to his hand and wrist, but hiked out under his own power and was transported by ambulance to Madison County Hospital in Rexburg.

23. ID: Bear Attack on Sleeping Man Stopped with a .45 Pistol (Oct 2015)

Steven Vouch reached for his gun when he realized he was being attacked, but it wasn't there. That is when his friend shot the bear with a .45. Vouch is on the left in the Cowboy hat.

24. AK: Guide Kills Attacking Grizzly with 9mm

In the last week in July, 2016, Phil Shoemaker had use a 9mm pistol to kill a grizzly that was threatening his clients and himself. It worked.

25. AK: Successful Bear Attack Defense with .44 Magnum (Aug 7, 2016)

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"She ran through that without even flinching," he said.

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She collapsed in the river about 5 feet – two steps – away from them.

26. AZ: Bow Hunter Uses Handgun to Stop Unprovoked Bear Attack In Sept, 2016

PAYSON, AZ – Authorities found two bear cubs after an archery deer hunter fatally shot an adult female bear with a handgun when it charged him in the Payson area.

27. MT: Father Uses .44 Magnum to Shoot Grizzly Bear off Son (Oct. 2017)

Dave had closed to within six feet of Rory and the bear. Not wanting to hit Rory, hoping to get the bear to release his son, he shot the bear in the hip.

It worked. The bear dropped Rory and spun toward him. His next round was meant for the bear's shoulder. The situation was dynamic. The 240 grain slug went through the bears neck.

With the bear coming at him, the bear's mouth was within two feet of his .44 Taurus when he fired the last shot. The bullet went alongside the bear's head, into its neck, penetrating the chest cavity.

28. WY: .45 Super Stops Grizzly Bear Charge (Oct. 2017)

The hunters jumped up and separated. The bear momentarily halted. Kelley fired a warning shot from his .45 Super. The bear moved away a little, behind some fire killed trees and brush, then came in again, fast. Kelly fired again, and the bear went down, rolled down slope and came to a halt, motionless.

Alaska Geologist Pistol Defense failure June 20, 2010, Grizzly Bear, .357 Magnum

Miller managed to pull out his .357 Magnum revolver and squeeze off a shot, possibly grazing the animal. Then he fell onto his stomach, dug his face into the dirt and covered his neck.

The bear went for his exposed right arm, gnawing and clawing it and chipping the bone off the tip of his elbow. The attack lasted 10 to 15 seconds, then the animal lumbered away.

As Miller rolled over and was getting to his knees, the bear, only about 40 yards away, came at him again.

He managed to fire two more shots, but with his right arm badly injured he thinks he missed the bear. Then he lay still as the animal gnawed and clawed at him.

After the second attack, Miller played dead again, lying still for three to five minutes. He tried to move and realized he couldn't. He was too badly injured.

"I was just hoping my radio was still in my vest pocket and it was," he said. "I got it out and started radioing mayday, which nobody answered."

I suspect that successful bear defenses with a pistol are under reported, much like successful firearm defenses against criminals. If a predatory black bear is shot and runs off, there are strong incentives for the shooter not to report the incident. Incidents where no human is injured are seldom considered news. Predatory black bear attacks are the [most common fatal black bear attacks](#) in North America. Only six of the pistol defenses listed above are defenses against black bears. Black bear predatory attacks often give potential victims good opportunities to use a pistol effectively.

There are about as many black bear fatalities as there are grizzly bear fatalities. There are strong incentives to not report incidents with grizzly bears where neither bear nor person were injured. A personal friend told me of successfully backing off a grizzly in Alaska with .41 Magnum pistol fire. The incident was never reported and is not included in the list above.

Even in the age of the Internet, reports can become difficult to find after a few years. I recall an incident where an Alaskan State Trooper killed a grizzly bear with his duty pistol, while an associate with a 12 gauge shotgun did not fire. I have not been able to find that report.

If anyone has sources for that incident, or of others not recorded here, either successes or failures, please let us know.

Pistol defense failures against bears should be widely reported. When humans are injured by bears, it is news.

In this compilation of incidents, one was a failure. The .357 magnum was fired three times. The shooter was mauled after the first shot and after the second and third shots. It seems likely the shooter missed with all three shots. It is the only bear defense with a pistol, that failed, that we have found.

One failure out of 29 incidents is better than a 96% success rate for pistol defenses against bears. Using a pistol to defend against bear attacks seems to be a viable option.

2017 by Dean Weingarten: Permission to share is granted when this notice is included.

About Dean Weingarten:

Dean Weingarten has been a peace officer, a military officer, was on the University of Wisconsin Pistol Team for four years, and was first certified to teach firearms safety in 1973. He taught the Arizona concealed carry course for fifteen years until the goal of constitutional carry was attained. He has degrees in meteorology and mining engineering, and recently retired from the Department of Defense after a 30-year career in Army Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation.

This post [Pistols for Defense against Bears? Failures are Rare](#) appeared first on [AmmoLand.com](#).

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