

Bear spray fail?

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A grizzly bear sow with yearling in Alaska/National Park Service photo

The inevitable has happened in Wyoming where a hunting guide who doused an attacking grizzly bear with pepper spray is dead.

It is impossible, however, to say definitively that the bear spray used by 37-year-old Mark Uptain failed.

“We know he didn’t initially use the bear spray,” Brad Hovinga, the Jackson region supervisor for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department said today. It is possible, Hovinga said, that Uptain was fatally injured before spraying the 250-pound sow Friday afternoon.

Uptain’s death marks the first time anyone has died after pepper spraying a grizzly, but an Anchorage woman working in the Alaska Interior near the Pogo Mine was last year killed by black bear that had been sprayed.

Prior to that attack, wildlife researchers had identified dozens of cases in which the spray worked near flawlessly. After a close examination of 66 cases from 1984 to 1994, Canadian bear researchers Stephen Herrero and Andrew Higgins reported that “in 94 percent of the close-range encounters with aggressive brown (grizzly bears), the spray appeared to stop the behavior the bear was displaying immediately prior to being sprayed. In three of these cases, the bear attacked the person spraying....In all three injurious encounters, the bear received a substantial dose of spray to the face.”

All of the injured people survived. The success of bear spray led former Alaskan Tom Smith, now Brigham Young University wildlife professor, to conclude that people hiking in bear-filled Alaska should carry spray as a standard practice in case of bear encounters.

But no weapon for use against attacking bears is fool-proof. Herrero and Smith have documented multiple deaths involving people carrying firearms.

Dead bears

After the attack on Uptain and client Corey Chubon from New Smyrna Beach, Fla., the Wyoming grizzly and a yearling-cub were located and killed by Wyoming wildlife authorities. Hovinga said bite marks on Uptain’s body implicated the cub in the fatal mauling as bite marks implicated a cub or cubs in a fatal mauling in Eagle River, a suburb just outside of Anchorage earlier this year.

After 44-year-old Michael Stoltis was attacked, killed and fed upon by a family of grizzly bears, officials of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game decided that in the interest of public safety it would be best to find and eliminate those bears, but the bears have never been reported to have been found.

Hovinga said Wyoming officials feel lucky to have found the sow and her cub and eliminated them both after what appears to have been an unprovoked attack. A partial account of what happened was provided to authorities by Chubon.

He told wildlife officials that the bears appeared while he and the guide were butchering an elk shot in an archery hunt a day earlier.

The hunter had killed the elk in the evening, but he and Uptain had been unable to find it until the next day. There was no sign the bears had found carcass before the hunters, Hovinga said.

The men had time to gut, skin and quarter the elk before the bear appeared. Uptain was removing the antlers when the healthy, approximately 10-year-old sow came running through a clearing above the men, reported Mike Koshmrl of the Jackson Hole News & Guide.

“It just came on a full run,” Hovinga told the reporter. “There was no hesitation.”

“We heard rocks tumble and out of nowhere two grizzly bears just started charging,” Chuban said in a taped interview with Orlando’s News 6.

The cub appears to have been following the sow who led the charge. The bears first ran into Chuban who was knocked down and grabbed by the leg.

“She swung me around in the air,” he said in the interview. Uptain at that point was yelling at the bears, which led them to turn from Chuban to the guide, who was carrying bear spray in a hip holster.

When he got it out and when he managed to deploy it is unclear, Hovinga said. He said Uptain’s body was found about 150 feet from where the attack began. An empty canister of bear spray with the safety off was feet from his body, but authorities couldn’t tell exactly where or when he started spraying, or what happened after the spray was used.

Authorities know the sow had been sprayed because of the residue left on her fur.

“We could smell it, and we could feel it,” Hovinga said.

Uptain’s body had not been fed on. It is possible, Hovinga said, that the spray drove the bears off after the initial attack and that Uptain then managed to stumble away to where he died.

“We can’t say the spray didn’t work,” he said.

Hunter calls Uptain hero

Chuban fled the scene as Uptain was being attacked. Hovinga said it’s very easy to second guess that behavior, but it’s possible that if the unarmed hunter had stayed he, too, would have been killed.

Koshmrl reported that after the bears turned away from Chubon, he “went for a Glock (handgun) that his guide had left with their gear a few yards uphill. For some reason, (Chubon) could not get the handgun to fire. When the female grizzly diverted her attention away from Uptain and toward the Floridian, he tossed the pistol to his guide. Evidently, it didn’t make it to Uptain, who was a lifelong elk hunter, small-business owner and family man.

“Chubon, whose leg, chest and arms were lacerated by the bruin, ran for his life. His last view of Uptain, which he relayed to investigators, was of the guide on his feet trying to fight off the sow....

“Bolting from the chaos, Chubon huffed it uphill to the duo’s horses, mounted one and rode uphill to a ridgeline near the crest of 10,258-foot-high Terrace Mountain in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. Amazingly, he caught a (cell phone) signal to phone authorities, who flew in to rescue him.”

Chubon in the television interview called Uptain a hero for saving his life. Hovinga reported the Glock was found near where the attack started. It appears to have landed out of Uptain’s reach.

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