
GRIZZLY BEARS ARE NOT KANGAROOS

Marg Leehane

Grizzly bears are not kangaroos. This thought didn't occur to me when the grizzly bear was charging out of the forest, but it should have. I should have been wondering why I ever left Australia, why I gave up a country so beautiful to live in a forest full very large animals. With teeth. Canadians love to talk Australia being a country with dozens of deadly creatures, but I'll take a snakebite over a grizzly bear mauling any day.

The grizzly launches

The grizzly was moving fast. His head was down and ears back. The locals would say, 'It's *all* bad'. I whipped the pepper spray out of its holster, preparing to give him a blast, with speed that would have impressed cowboys in a showdown. My boyfriend was waving his arms above his head and shouting, 'Hey! Bear!' The whole situation had been our fault, and now it was my time to experience an 'aggressive encounter' with a grizzly bear first-hand. You can read about it all you like, but nothing can prepare you for the sudden disjointed moments of an unplanned encounter with North America's largest land predator.

Tom and I had spent most of the morning photographing bears. Or, more accurately, we had spent most of the morning waiting silently for bears to venture onto the grasslands of this coastal estuary to be photographed. While we swatted flies and shifted position to keep our bums from falling asleep, the bears eluded us. It was an unseasonably warm day in this part of British Columbia on the west coast of Canada, with temperatures soaring in the low 20's. It may have even hit 23 degrees at one point. We waited, and waited. An occasional breath of wind would stir the surface of the estuary, creating ripples across the water like goose bumps on your arm. We swatted flies, and waited. Nothing.

We had anchored our aluminium boat in a tidal estuary and were watching from a log by the water. From where we sat, there were about 400 metres of open grasslands between us and the forest. Grizzly bears like to feed on the new grasses and sedges in spring, so we were hoping that some grizzlies would venture onto the grassland and start grazing. As you looked to the north of us, the area of open grassland gradually decreased until the forest finally came directly to the estuary. Beyond that, the grassland opened up again into another meadow.

Just as we were about to give up for the day, we spotted a mating pair to the north. They were just beyond the next meadow. They weren't actually mating, but when two adult grizzlies are hanging around together in springtime you have a pretty good idea that's what's going on. Male grizzlies tend to harass female grizzlies and their cubs, so most of the time the females deliberately avoid the males. I would too if they were going to eat my offspring. Understandably, the girls have a bit of a chip on their shoulders. Our grizzlies disappeared into the forest. We packed up our gear and started walking slowly in their direction. They were most likely going to smell our scent and move back into the forest, but we hoped that they might stay in the next meadow. And smile for the cameras.

A long way from Doncaster

Now this is a real job. I grew up in the suburbs of Melbourne, where a dangerous wildlife encounter involved a magpie swooping you from above. After university and working as a computer consultant, came the obligatory 12-month overseas trip. Foreigners are amazed by this Australian rite of passage, the only country where the obligatory year of 'national service' means backpacking around Europe and Asia. I'm still on that 12-month overseas trip, although it has lasted nine years so far. Most of it was spent in quite sensible jobs in London and San Francisco, until I fell in love with a biologist. This is something that your parents do not want to hear, let me tell you. They want to hear that you have just become engaged to a self-made millionaire who is looking to start a family in the suburb next to theirs. And that he is willing to drive them to lawn bowls on Tuesdays.

Alas, my destiny took a sharp turn to find me working with grizzly bears in Canada.

I understand Canadians. They come from a huge country, most of which is uninhabited. The majority of their population live in a narrow corridor, leaving the bush to wild animals, prospectors and intrepid souls. They even call it 'the bush', like us. They love sport. They make good sausage rolls. They are modest and love to laugh. If you have to be an ex-pat anywhere, this is a good country.

Port Hardy is a man's town, filled with commercial fishermen and loggers. It has a population of 9,000 and no traffic lights. Mine are the only Blundstones and Akubra in town, that's for sure. Although, the loggers all secretly covet the Blundstones. The grizzly bear tours are operated on the central coast of British Columbia, inaccessible by road. We get over there by seaplane, the tiny four-seater landing in a spray of water. A spine of mountains run along the coast, with their deep glaciated valleys feeding into the Pacific Ocean. It is temperate rain forest up here, more dense than a tropical rainforest. The fjord-like inlets and river systems host the

annual runs of spawning salmon. This is the land of mountains lions and bears, moose and mink. Sometimes we take a boat over to the grizzlies, stopping to watch killer whales and grey whales along the way. Who could have thought that you could actually grow up to live a National Geographic documentary every day?

Interrupting a bear's picnic

As we walked to the north, quietly hoping to spy the bears, the area of open grassland gradually began to decrease. The forest was getting closer. It is always nice to have a buffer zone between you and the forest, so that you can see what is coming. Like, for instance, an angry ball of brown fur and claws flying in your direction. Yet we just wanted to get beyond the point where the forest actually reached the estuary and into the next open meadow.

Right at the point where there was no grassland left, all hell broke loose. Huffing and puffing noises exploded from the trees, and from beside us two brown blurs were running into the forest. The huffs and puffs were not a sign of ardour - that is a bear's way of showing that it is very unhappy. One of them decided to return. He was running straight at us. He came over a small crest and kept coming. It all happened so quickly that I wasn't even really scared. I just whipped out my pepper spray and hoped that the bear would choose my boyfriend first. (After all, he is the wildlife biologist. He had weighed the risks of working with grizzlies much more carefully than I. And, more importantly, he won't be reading this). With about six metres to go, the bear stopped. It turned around and ran back into the forest. It was time to leave.

The second charge

We walked back along the estuary, thankful that both we and the bears had escaped unharmed. I felt a little sheepish when re-holstering my pepper spray, realizing that I hadn't taken off the safety clip. So much for my John Wayne impression. The whole thing was our fault. We should have been regularly calling out, to let any animals in the area know that we were passing through. Those bears had chosen to take a lover's nap, and woke up to their worst nightmare: having humans close by.

We had been walking for about 10 minutes, when I glanced over my shoulder. (Okay, we had been walking for about 1.5 seconds when I glanced over my shoulder, but I had been continuing to do so for the last 10 minutes). This time there were two brown specks against the forest. I couldn't quite make them out, so I checked with my binoculars. It was the bears.

They had emerged from the forest. One of them was looking around wildly. Then it saw us. And started running, right in our direction. Now I had time to be scared. The hair stood up at the nape of my neck. I could understand a surprised bear charging at us, but the idea of them actually seeking us out from afar was very disconcerting. Soon I didn't need my binoculars anymore, as both bears loomed larger and larger.

We planted our tripods and started waving our hands over our heads.

'Hey, bears. Back off. Go away. There is good salmon to be had at the other end of the river'.

They kept running. It was time to grab the pepper spray again, and this time I removed the safety clip. Tom chambered a shell in the shotgun.

'Hey! Bears!'.

They slowed their charge a little, unsure of what to do. It is so much easier to cope with fear when everything is happening in a blur, not just walking slowly towards you. Then they trotted into the forest. Great. Now we couldn't see exactly where they were, but could hear them crashing through the undergrowth. And they were getting closer.

'Let's give them some room', said Tom.

I heartily agreed. It was low tide in the estuary, an expanse of sucking mud laying before us. We started across to the other side. In terms of getaway shoes, gumboots are not the ideal choice. I sank to knee depth with every step, falling behind Tom.

He yelled without looking over his shoulder, 'Keep moving'.

You don't have to tell me twice. I happily slipped out of the gumboots and forged ahead, just in my socks. Better to have muddy socks than be mauled horrifically by a grizzly bear, is my new motto.

We reached the high bank on the other side of the estuary, and turned around to look for the bears. They were galloping off, heading away from us into the bush. We were out of danger. The forlorn gumboots were sticking out of the mud at skewed angles. They looked like the boots of a comic-book character, as if the person who belonged to them had been running so fast that they left their boots behind. Give me a mob of kangaroos any day.



Margaret Leehane grew up in the wilds of the Melbourne suburbs. After completing a very sensible degree in information technology and working in that field for nearly a decade, she experienced an early 30's crisis and now finds herself

sleeping under the stars most nights. When not leading groups of kayakers to see 30 metre blue whales in Mexico, she is sending people off to meet grizzly bears in Canada.

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