The Bear Attacks that Changed America

By Lauren Tarshis

It was July 1967. Steve Ashlock and John Cook were on a fishing trip in Montana’s Glacier National Park. The boys were 14. They’d arrived the day before from their hometown some 40 miles away, excited for three days of cooking over a campfire and sleeping under the stars. (paragraph 1)

Glacier had been packed with visitors all summer. But Steve and John escaped the honking cars and crowds of hikers. They trekked several miles up to Trout Lake, one of several lakes set among Glacier’s 1 million acres of majestic forests and rugged peaks. (paragraph 2)

The boys’ first day was perfect. They set up their campsite and ate the trout they caught in the lake. Best of all: They spotted a group of bears that came to the lake for an early-evening drink. Some were the smaller and more common black bears. But at least two were grizzlies; the boys could tell by their lighter-colored fur and the hump between their shoulders. What luck! (paragraph 3)

Glacier teemed with marvelous creatures. Hawks peered down from trees. Bighorn sheep perched on cliffs. Mountain lions slunk around the trees. But few creatures inspired awe like the grizzly, North America’s biggest and most powerful animal. (paragraph 4)

Steve and John kept their distance. They knew that grizzlies could be dangerous. Still, they weren’t scared. Grizzlies usually avoided humans. In Glacier’s 57-year history, there had never been a fatal grizzly bear attack. (paragraph 5)

That was about to change. Unimaginable terror was just ahead. Two horrific grizzly attacks would soon shatter the peaceful beauty of Glacier National Park. And ideas about grizzlies—and humans—would never be the same. (paragraph 6)

Powerful and SACRED

Grizzlies have lived in North America for some 50,000 years—far longer than humans have. When the first people arrived, more than 12,000 years ago, tens of thousands of grizzlies lived up and down the western part of the continent. (paragraph 7)

America’s first people formed dozens of nations and tribes. Each group had its own languages, customs, and beliefs. But many of these diverse groups shared a deep respect for bears. In Cheyenne legends, powerful bears tested the strength and mettle of warriors. To the Hopi people, bears were sacred beings with amazing powers of healing. (paragraph 8)

Unlike black bears, which could once be found in all corners of America, grizzlies were unique to the West. It wasn’t until the early 1800s that stories of these larger, more powerful bears began to drift eastward. The most famous of the first grizzly accounts came from explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. These men led a historic four-year “journey of exploration” of the American West. (paragraph 9)

While traveling along the northern plains, Lewis and Clark met members of the Hidatsa tribe. These people warned of a formidable bear that even the most skilled hunters were wary of. But Lewis and Clark shrugged off these warnings. Unlike the Hidatsa, who hunted with bows and arrows, Lewis and Clark and their men carried rifles. They thought their bullets could protect them against any animal. They were wrong. (paragraph 10)

TRULY SAFE

As they crossed into what is now Montana, Lewis and Clark’s team came across grizzlies. The men were amazed by the bears’ size; some towered 7 feet high when standing on their hind legs. The men watched in shock as their bullets seemed to slide off a grizzly’s thick fur and layers of armor-like muscle. Lewis, in his journal, described the grizzly as the “most tremendous-looking animal” and as “extremely hard to kill.” He thought it best that his men sleep with their rifles and never venture out alone. (paragraph 11)

When Lewis and Clark returned to the East, they published stories about their travels. Some of the stories made grizzlies seem like monsters—essentially mindless killers with a taste for human flesh. In the coming decades, as thousands of people settled in the West, many felt justified in killing grizzlies whenever possible. Tens of thousands of grizzlies were shot and poisoned. Nearly all the rest were chased from their ancestral habitats. (paragraph 12)
By the time John and Steve were growing up in Montana, fewer than 1,000 grizzlies remained in the lower 48 states, and most lived in the northern wilderness of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. The only truly safe place for a grizzly was in one of the region’s two national parks, Glacier and Yellowstone. In these parks, hunting was prohibited and all animals were protected by law. (paragraph 13)

**HIGHLY INTELLIGENT**

By the mid-20th century, scientists had come to understand that grizzlies were not mindless monsters. Grizzlies are, in fact, highly intelligent, with keen memories. They are shy and usually avoid humans. They will eat nearly anything but tend to favor roots and berries. In Glacier, their favorite treats are plump little rodents called marmots. (paragraph 14)

Grizzlies do have fearsome powers. Their front paws can crack a skull in one swipe. Their long, sharp claws can tear apart tree stumps. Their jaws can chomp through metal and bone. They can run faster than a galloping horse, swim for hours, and climb high into trees when they want to (which is not often). But they rarely attack humans. (paragraph 15)

Normally, a grizzly attacks only if taken by surprise or if it feels threatened. This does happen on occasion. In 1960, a mother bear had attacked five hikers on a remote trail. Such stories were rare, though. Steve and John weren’t scared on that July evening when they saw grizzly bears drinking from Trout Lake. In fact, the boys felt lucky to see one of Earth’s most amazing creatures in the wild. It was what happened the next evening that filled them with terror. (paragraph 16)

The sun hadn’t yet set. The boys were out on the lake, horsing around on a pile of floating logs. Suddenly, they heard a strange sound. They looked over at their campsite. A skinny grizzly was devouring a loaf of their bread. They hoped the bear would leave. But then it started to tear apart their backpacks. The boys wanted to save their gear. They shouted at the bear. They thought their voices would scare it off. But that’s not what happened. (paragraph 17)

The boys weren’t grizzly experts, but something about this bear seemed strange—and dangerous. They waited until the bear was distracted by a pan of trout they had prepared for dinner, and then they crept to shore. They threw on their boots and fled, praying the bear wouldn’t chase after them. What John and Steve didn’t know was that Glacier was in the midst of a grizzly crisis. Some grizzlies had lost their natural fear of humans and were behaving aggressively. But it was not the bears that were the real problem. It was people. (paragraph 18)

**“GRIZZLY SHOW”**

More specifically, it was the trash that people were leaving all over the park: leftover food at campsites, wrappers and broken bottles on trails. Glacier was filled with litter. Some people in the park were even using garbage to purposely lure grizzlies into contact with humans. Each evening at a rustic hotel called the Granite Park Chalet, workers would dump leftover food from the dining room into an outdoor pit. Guests would then crowd onto a balcony, clapping and hooting as they watched grizzlies fight over leftover hot dogs and chili. Some were disgusted by this cruel, circus-like spectacle. But night after night, the show went on. (paragraph 19)

Feeding human food to a wild animal isn’t just unhealthy for the animal’s diet. It can also permanently change the animal’s habits and relationship to the natural environment. In Glacier, some grizzlies began to depend entirely on garbage for survival. They shook off their natural shyness toward humans and ventured boldly into more crowded parts of the park. For these bears, humans had become a source of food. (paragraph 20)

**A HARROWING TREK**

John and Steve made it out of the wilderness that night. After a harrowing 4-mile trek through the darkness, they reached a ranger station. They told their story to the ranger on duty. The man was not surprised. He and other rangers had been hearing about that strange grizzly all summer. But the rangers had other concerns. Never had the park been as crowded as it was that summer. And wildfires were burning in some areas. Many rangers knew something needed to be done about that troublesome grizzly, but they had more pressing problems to deal with. (paragraph 21)

From the early 1900s through the 1940s in Yellowstone National Park, “lunch counters” were used to lure bears for tourists’ entertainment. They were essentially giant garbage heaps. Today, such practices are banned. Instead, bear-proof trash cans protect bears from getting into human garbage and signs reminding tourists not to interfere with wildlife.

What is the meaning of prohibited as used in paragraph 13?

What effect did garbage have on grizzly bears in Glacier National Park?

What was prohibited?
The boys spent the night in a cabin. The next day, they returned to their campsite. The grizzly was gone. But it had ripped apart their tent, smashed their lantern, and eaten all their food. Cans of spaghetti and chili were torn apart. The boys left the park with what little of their camping gear they could salvage. Two weeks later, they would realize that they’d been lucky to escape with their lives. (paragraph 22)

**SHOCKING NEWS**

On August 13, the world woke up to shocking news from Glacier. During the night, two 19-year-old women had been killed by two different grizzly bears. The attacks were unrelated; they happened 7 miles apart. Neither grizzly had been surprised or threatened. The bears attacked the women as they slept in their tents. How could this have happened? In the days that followed, this was the question that echoed across Glacier’s forests and lakes. Never before had there been a fatal grizzly attack in Glacier. How was it possible that in a single night, two grizzlies had become killers? (paragraph 23)

Glacier’s leaders scrambled to provide an answer. It was the heat, they said. Or the wildfires. Or maybe lightning had spooked the bears. Some even blamed the women, for wearing scented makeup that could have attracted the bears. Rangers were ordered to track down and euthanize the grizzlies that attacked the women. One was a mother bear that had been seen with her two cubs at the Granite Park garbage pit. Her front paw was badly torn, likely from broken glass. The other bear was in even sorrier shape. It was malnourished and had broken glass embedded in its teeth. This was the skinny bear from Trout Lake. (Finally, Glacier’s leaders had to face the stark truth: It was not weather or fires or makeup that had caused the grizzlies to turn vicious. It was garbage. (paragraph 24)

For years, rangers and park leaders had known trash was a problem. All summer they had been getting complaints about grizzlies lurking near campgrounds and menacing humans. Yet no action was taken. Glacier’s leaders had failed to uphold the founding mission of the National Park Service: to protect wild places and the creatures that live there. As a result, two women had lost their lives. Four grizzlies were dead too (the mother grizzly’s cubs were also euthanized). (paragraph 25)

**A TRANSFORMATION**

Nothing could change the tragic events of “the night of the grizzlies,” as that night in August became known. But those events triggered a transformation of Glacier and the rest of America’s national parks. Rangers cleaned up the trails and campgrounds. They worked harder to enforce rules against littering and illegal camping. They also installed bear-proof trash cans so that grizzlies could not eat garbage. Garbage pits like those at Granite Park were closed. At campgrounds, picnic areas were set up at a distance from where people slept. New cables were installed so campers could hoist their food bags up higher than a grizzly could reach. If a grizzly was seen near a trail, the trail would be closed. Aggressive bears would be moved to remote parts of the park. (paragraph 26)

Those new rules led to lasting change. Today, Glacier is a cleaner and healthier place for its 300 grizzlies. It’s safer for the other animals that live there too—and for humans. This past year, more than 2.5 million people visited Glacier. Like John and Steve, they wandered the winding trails and gazed across the jewel-like lakes. A few even caught glimpses of grizzly bears. And hopefully, they felt lucky. (paragraph 27)

In the section “Shocking News” the author writes, “Neither grizzly had been surprised or threatened; the bears attacked the women as they slept in their tents.” Why is this sentence important? What does it show about the bears?

How do the changes Glacier National Park made after the bear attacks, such as closing a trail if a grizzly is nearby, bringing in bear-proof garbage cans, and renovating campgrounds, demonstrate a shift in the park’s point of view about grizzly bears?