

# Hunt for the Rogue Bear

Last September, a black bear attacked two campers in the BWCA. Officers dispatched the animal, but had they found the right bear? Neither victims nor investigators were sure. Here is the story of the inquest that resolved the question

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ON SEPT. 14 and 15, 1987, a black bear injured two Boundary Waters Canoe Area campers in unprovoked attacks. On Sept. 16, a bear was killed 1½ miles from the first attack site and three miles from the second. Was the same bear responsible for both attacks? Was the right bear killed?

In this account, we describe the attacks, the investigation to determine whether the right bear was killed, and efforts to find an explanation for the bear's abnormal behavior, abnormal in that black bear attacks on people are rare.

In the late 1930s, a female black bear severely mauled two DNR foresters in northern Minnesota. The circumstances related to the incident are unclear, but according to one source the men may have been attacked while trying to catch a cub.

In 1965, a 50-year-old man was fishing alone on the Dead Moose River in north-central Minnesota. Days later his partially consumed body was found along with fresh tracks of two bears. Whether he was killed by a bear or eaten after he died of other causes was never determined.

These two incidents represent the only reported accounts of injuries from unprovoked attacks by black bears in Minnesota. Because circumstances related to these two incidents were unclear, one could argue that no case of an unprovoked bear attack in which a person was injured has been documented in our state—that is, until the summer of 1987.

## Rogue Bear

Tyson Crowder, 19, an Outward Bound student from Maryville, Tenn., was camping alone on Wabang Lake in the BWCA. Seven other students and two Outward Bound instructors, Mike and Ann Poe, were camped at other sites around the narrow lake.

The Poes paddled by at 5 p.m. for a routine check on Crowder. Sitting on the shore, Crowder said he was fine and watched until they disappeared into a bay a quarter mile away. He then saw a bear approaching.

**First Attack.** The bear looked at him and hesitated. Crowder leaped to an offshore rock, and the bear charged. As Crowder backed off the rock into shallow water, the bear rose up on its hind legs and caught Crowder's head in its claws and mouth. Crowder screamed and fought. The bear dragged him toward the woods. Crowder clung to a tree.

Students across the lake heard Crowder's screams and alerted the Poes. Within three minutes, they reached Crowder's camp, jumped from their canoe, and struck the bear over the head with their paddles. The bear retreated a few yards and watched as the Poes helped Crowder into their canoe. It then swam away across the lake.

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The Poes collected the other students into a single camp and built a fire to keep Crowder warm. Through the night they took turns tending the fire and caring for Crowder's head, neck, and shoulder wounds. At first light, Mike Poe and two students set off for help. By 12:15 p.m. they had paddled, portaged, and motorboated 10 miles to Campbell's Cabins, a resort on the Canadian side of Lac La Croix. They contacted a Boat plane which flew to Wabang Lake, the scene of the attack, and Crowder was flown to a hospital in Ely.

That same morning, a second bear attack occurred two miles northwest of where Crowder had camped. The bear appeared at 1 p.m. while Jeremy Cleaveland, 52, of Minnetonka, Minn., and his 29-year-old son James were packing up their camp on Lady Boot Bay. Both men yelled and waved their arms at the approaching bear. It stopped 20 feet away and began pacing. James grabbed the main food pack and ran over the bank toward the canoe.

The bear started toward Jeremy. It stopped when he threw water at it, then charged. Jeremy threw his canteen at the bear, ran for the bay, and dove in on a dead run. After swimming a few strokes, he stood, turned, and found himself face to face with the bear.

He turned again, and the bear grabbed him by the back of the neck and began dragging him toward shore. James leapt out of the canoe. The two men tried desperately but unsuc-



**Above:** Author Dave Garshelis compares spacing of teeth in dead bear's skull with punctures on Jeremy Cleaveland's left shoulder. **Right:** Typical black bear (but not bear in BWCA attack) stands 2-3½ feet tall at shoulder.



cessfully to pry the powerful jaws off Jeremy's neck. James then hit the bear with a canoe paddle. After three blows to the head and neck, the bear dropped Jeremy and retreated to shore.

The men scrambled into the canoe and paddled off. Jeremy had tooth punctures on his neck, back, and thigh. With the help of campers and fishermen along the way, they canoed and motorboated to Campbell's Cabins. From there they flew to a hospital in Cook.

**Hunt Begins.** The next day, the Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Forest Service joined forces to find the bear. Four conservation officers and a wildlife technician were flown to the second attack site and three officers were flown to a USFS cabin on Lac La Croix. Both crews immediately spread out to search for the rogue bear.

Signs warning campers of the situation were placed at portages in the vicinity of the attack sites; other campers were verbally warned by USFS pilots.

Later that day, on an island almost three miles southeast of the second attack site, a bear wandered into a campsite occupied by five campers. Previously warned about the rogue bear, they ran for their canoes. The bear chased one camper several yards, but stopped short of the water. The campers watched from their canoes as the bear investigated the camp, tore up a garbage pack, and finally lay down to lick spilled fruit punch from the ground. The two women paddled for help while the men watched the bear.

Shortly afterward, three officers and two motorboat operators were speeding toward the island. A plane circled the island in case the bear started back to the mainland. COs

## Rogue Bear

Conrad Tikkala and Lloyd Steen loaded their rifles.

From the water, they saw the bear raise its head, then resume licking the punch. Tikkala fired and hit it in the chest. The bear slumped. From the rocking boat, Steen placed another bullet in its chest. Tikkala followed with a load of buckshot to the head, neck, and forequarters.

The bear was a small adult female (which later tipped the scales at only 117 pounds). They tied the carcass to a float of the plane to fly it to Ely. As they secured the carcass, the relaxing body defecated. Quick-thinking Tikkala retrieved and bagged the feces.

That act turned out to be one of the most important in the investigation that followed.

**White Spot.** Bear biologists David Garshelis and Lynn Rogers met the float plane at the USFS dock in Ely and began the job of determining whether or not the right bear had been shot. At that point there was not enough evidence to call off the hunt. The dead bear was only half the weight estimated by the victims, and it stood about a foot shorter. It also was black, except for a white spot on its chest. Neither victim had noticed a white spot, and one insisted the bear was more brown than black.

Nor had the dead bear seemed aggressive enough to be the rogue bear. It seemed to have been after the campers' food rather than the campers themselves. The short chase after the

camper at the kill site seemed a little unusual, but short bluff charges by bears are not uncommon. A black bear can run nearly twice as fast as a person and would have little trouble catching a person if it wanted to. Furthermore, the attack bear had gone into the water after people, whereas this one had not.

When the dead bear was autopsied, numerous pieces of plastic—garbage bags, produce bags, candy wrappers—were found in its stomach, none of which was consumed at the two attack sites.

This finding seemed to support the opinion that the dead animal was used to humans, a camp nuisance, but not the rogue bear. An analysis of the handful of documented cases of predatory attacks on people by North American black bears indicated that attack bears typically had little or no previous contact with people.

Finally, bruises about the head and neck from canoe paddle strikes were not visible on the dead bear, although they may have been obscured by the buckshot injuries. Greg Wilker, a USFS wildlife technician, found small bear tracks at the second attack site that seemed about the size of the footpads of the dead bear, but still no hard evidence linked this bear to the attacks.

The victims believed the wrong bear had been killed; they began taking rabies shots. The hunt went on.

Over the next two days, no other attacks occurred and no fresh bear sign was found in the vicinity of the

previous attacks. The biologists then decided to examine the contents of the dead bear's stomach more thoroughly.

Barely noticeable among the numerous pieces of plastic were several thin fibers, one of which was the same length and color as Crowder's hair.

On Sept. 18, these fibers and a sample of Crowder's hair were flown to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Forensic Science Laboratory in St. Paul. There the hairs were identified as human and the search was called off.

However, it would take another 11 days of tedious microscopic examination before lab analysts could positively match the hair of the victims to the hairs found in the bear's stomach. The possibility still existed that the bear had ingested hairs similar to Crowder's when rummaging through campground food or garbage.

**Sausage Wrapper.** Was there more evidence that the dead bear was the rogue bear? Indeed there was.

The Outward Bound instructors had by now returned from the woods. Further discussions with them indicated that Crowder, the first victim, had given a wrong location for his campsite. When the actual site was searched, black bear-hair—not brown as reported by the second victim—was found caught in the bark of the tree that Crowder had held onto during the attack.

Another discussion with Jeremy

Cleaveland uncovered more evidence. After Jeremy went through his camping gear, which had been retrieved and returned to him, he discovered that the bear had eaten a 3-inch piece of sausage from one of his packs. The wrapper, still showing the brand name, was found in the dead bear's feces.

Next, James Cleaveland recalled seeing a black tooth while trying to pry the bear's jaws off his father. The dead bear was found to have the same black tooth. We also asked a forensic dentist, Ann Norrlander, to compare the tooth spacing of the dead bear's jaws with the puncture wounds on Jeremy. She found an excellent match.

The clincher came when Crime Lab analysts Mary Ann Strauss and Donald Melander finished their investigation. Not only did four of the fibers in the bear's stomach match Crowder's hair, but another five matched hair samples from Jeremy Cleaveland. There was no longer doubt in anyone's mind: The rogue bear was dead.

One question remained: Why did the bear turn rogue?

The veterinary laboratory report from Dr. Ronald Werdin, University of Minnesota, revealed nothing unusual, except that the 7-year-old bear had a very low supply of body fat. It was negative for rabies, brain tumors, brain inflammation, and other diseases, toxins, bacteria, or viruses that might cause abnormal behavior.

It did not have an unusual parasite load, nor wounds other than from the

## Rogue Bear

shots that killed it. There were no old bullets lodged in the body. The teeth were not decayed despite the black stain on one of them. The pattern of placental scars in the uterus indicated the bear had produced litters in two previous years.

Although the source of the bear's problem was not found, its lack of body fat indicated a nutrition problem. However, hunger alone is not a sufficient explanation for the attacks. Hundreds of hungry bears roamed northeastern Minnesota in 1985 when most natural foods (berries) failed and bears invaded Duluth to find things to eat, yet there were no attacks. The rogue bear had experienced this food shortage in 1985, but was not compelled to attack that year. The cause of the attacks in 1987 thus remains an enigma.

**Hot-pepper Spray.** Chances of campers encountering another rogue bear in the near future are very slim. If attacked, a person should use every available weapon, including feet and fists, to fight the bear. Black bears that menace people are often hesitant at first. During this period of vacillation,

aggressive action by a person could dissuade an attack.

A nonharmful means of repulsing bears that approach too close is spraying them in the eyes with repellent. Capsicin, the active ingredient of hot peppers, is the most effective black bear repellent. Sold commercially as "Dog Shield" and "Halt," it is used as a dog repellent by mail carriers and meter readers. In several hundred tests, no bear has appeared angered by the spray. Most retreated immediately; the few that returned retreated when sprayed again.

Finally, the rarity of black bear attacks cannot be overstated. That in itself enhances the intrigue surrounding such an incident. In this case, the investigation, which hinged on the fortuitous retention of a few hair fragments in the bear's stomach and some key recollections by one of the victims, was equally intriguing.

Except for some scars, both victims have now fully recovered. Both plan to continue camping in bear country and hope that a rare attack such as the ones they survived will not lead to innocent bears being killed.