

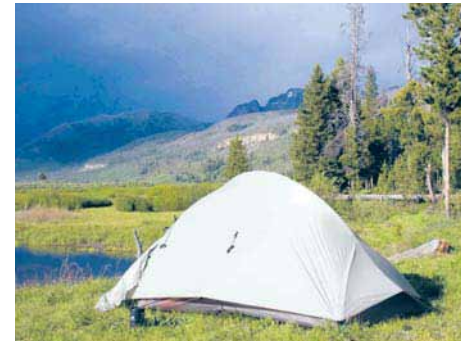


Travel

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2009

By WILLIAM POWERS | Special to The Washington Post

I read the wrong book before my Yellowstone trip. “Death in Yellowstone: Accidents and Foolhardiness in the First National Park,” by historian Lee Whittlesey, tells the stories of 250 people killed in Yellowstone by bison, avalanches, geysers, forest fires and, most menacing of all, *Ursus arctos horribilis*, the North American grizzly bear. ¶ There’s the disturbing case, for example, of the Swiss backpacker who disappeared while camping in the backcountry in 1984. When park rangers searched for her, they found only half of her body. A grizzly had slashed through her tent, dragged her out and apparently eaten the other half. ¶ Despite the obvious implications of “Death in Yellowstone,” there I was in July, in a Yellowstone National Park ranger station in Wyoming with my friend Jason Williams, the 33-year-old owner of Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris, requesting a wilderness permit to do exactly what that Swiss hiker had done: camp deep in Yellowstone’s grizzly country.



PHOTOS BY JASON WILLIAMS

One of the author’s tents, above, set up next to Slough Creek in Yellowstone’s backcountry.

Below, two grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area in Wyoming. About **1,000 grizzlies** live in the lower **48 states**, including a population in the park that was removed from Endangered Species Act protection in 2007.

See YELLOWSTONE, Page F5



Finding the ‘Tonic of Wilderness’ in Yellowstone

YELLOWSTONE, From Page F1

We indicated on a map where we planned to go, and the park ranger frowned deeply. “Why’d you want to go back there?” he asked. At this, Jason winced. His tall, chiseled body — already taut with only about 0.01 percent body fat — contracted in disbelief. Through a hard squint, he sized up the ranger, who didn’t appear particularly rangeresque with his rubber-tire waist and pale face. The ranger broke the stare-down, looking away and shifting his feet. “But there’s grizzlies back there,” he said.

Jason smiled broadly. “My point exactly. And that wilderness pass?”

Not quite yet. First, the mandatory 15-minute video on Yellowstone safety. I watched, rapt, but poor Jason had been force-fed the video a hundred times. “Why’d you want to go back there?” he muttered sarcastically several times while it played. To complete what Jason dubbed his “castration,” the ranger’s assistant insisted that he answer two dozen questions about things as simple as boiling stream water to avoid a tummy ache.

After an hour of red tape, we got the wilderness pass and drove Jason’s pickup into the vast Lamar Valley, dubbed the Serengeti of North America. Indeed. Herds of bison and elk grazed out to the horizon, interspersed with pronghorn antelope, the world’s second-fastest mammal after the cheetah.

I’d come to Yellowstone for just the sense of awe I was beginning to feel, what Thoreau called “the tonic of wilderness.” That tonic was already starting to cure my New York City-induced nature deficit disorder, blotting from my consciousness screeching F trains, drop-dead deadlines and fickle WiFi connections. But Jason wasn’t impressed. “Too much prey around here,” he said. “Let’s find some predators.”

We left the bright valley and drove into Lamar’s darker side, a splinter canyon of thick forest. Through the pickup window, I tried to spot the sparkling eyes or brown coat of a grizzly. Not surprisingly, I didn’t see either. Though they historically ranged from California to West Virginia and down to Mexico, today only about 1,000 grizzlies live in the lower 48 in five small populations, including one in Yellowstone. (An estimated 30,000 survive in Alaska.)

And they continue to be threatened. Around Montana’s Glacier National Park and Alberta’s Banff National Park, grizzly bears are sometimes hit by cars on the roads or by trains as they scavenge for grain that has fallen from boxcars. Other times, attracted by bird or pet food, they come into contact with humans and are killed. They’re sometimes shot by hunters who mistake them for legal-to-hunt black bears. But the larger reason for their minuscule numbers is the road building, logging and energy and mineral exploration needed for a planet of more than 6 billion humans with a growing appetite.

Despite grizzly bears’ small numbers, the U.S. government said the animals are now “thriving in the Yellowstone ecosystem” and removed bears in the park area from Endangered Species Act protection in 2007, setting off a firestorm of protest. The Natural Resources Defense Council and other environmental groups have filed suit to re-list the Yellowstone grizzly.

Into the Wild

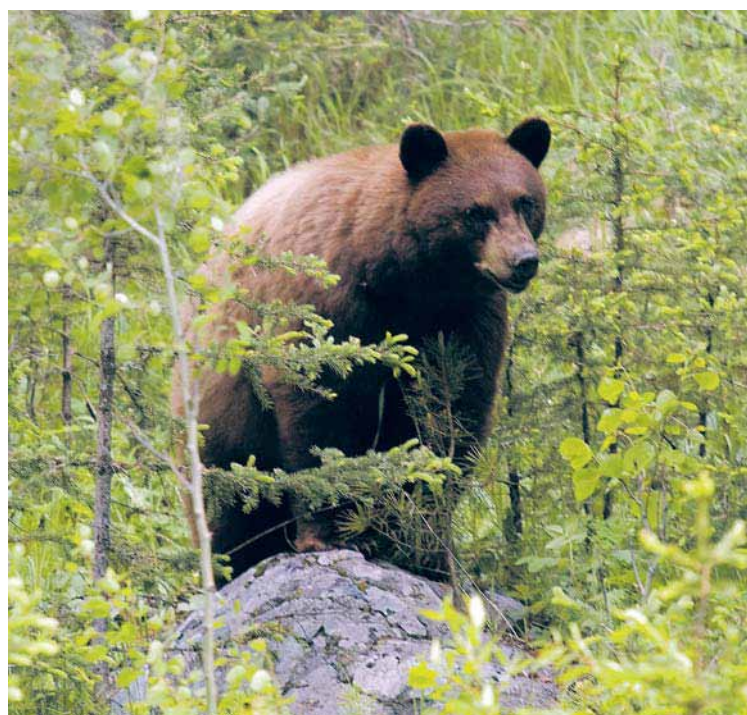
Jason handed me my weapon. His was in a holster strapped to his waist. He quick-drew it, Old West style. “*Oleoresin capsicum*,” he said, “a.k.a. pepper spray.”

Or bear spray. Jason showed me how to release the canister’s safety and fire should a bear charge, explaining that it temporarily blinds the grizzly. A little cruel, I thought. But then I remembered that Swiss hiker, and suddenly it didn’t seem so cruel. Plus, even environmental groups promote it. As Sierra Club’s grizzly project manager Heidi Godwin said in a press release, “The proper use of bear pepper spray will reduce human injuries caused by bears . . . [and] the number of grizzly bears killed in self defense.”

But there’s a catch. The stuff shoots only 20 feet. So with an 800-pound grizzly barreling toward you at 30 miles an hour, you have to hold fire until the beast is practically mauling you.

“It’s better to look away,” Jason said. “Then you might not fire prematurely.”

But after several hours of hiking, I’d forgotten about bears and sprays. I’d even forgotten about the two bottles of beer that Jason had concealed among rocks in the icy stream at the trailhead, promising those cold ones as our reward if we came back alive. I’d forgotten all this in my wonder at what was around me, the day hikers far behind us, nothing but wild open country spread out ahead. As we forded a river beneath a jagged granite escarpment and dropped into a meadow of wildflowers, I mulled something environmentalist Aldo Leopold once said: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see



Scenes from Yellowstone National Park and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, from top: bull elk in the Gibbon River, an American black bear and American bison. The park is home to the largest concentration of mammals in the lower 48 states. At right, the author rests near Slough Creek in Yellowstone’s backcountry, where you need a permit for overnight trips.

land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

Just before traveling to Yellowstone, I’d seen the documentary “Food, Inc.,” which had startled and perplexed me. The way we raise chickens, hogs and cows is so industrial that it seems we’ve all but extracted ourselves from nature. Sure, eating organic food is a great start at changing that, but what about — pardon me — *being* organic food? I began to wonder, naively, what it would feel like to step back into the food chain, if only for a few days.

Alas, such philosophizing was moot when I saw the beast. Right beside the trail, not 20 yards away, stood an enormous bear.

No, this was not a grizzly — a variety of brown bear — but the more common black bear. About a half-million live in 41 U.S. states. I tried to calm myself with the thought that black bears are often portrayed as cuddly. A black bear that Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot on a hunting trip was, after all, the model for the teddy bear. And black bears have killed a statistically insignificant number of North Americans since 2000, just 16.

Even so, at that moment I wasn’t imagining the 450 million North Americans not mauled to death by black bears. I could only manage to visualize the 16 who had been. Slowly, I backedpedaled away.

Jason, however, did the opposite: He walked toward the bear.

Now, readers, I hate to do this to you. Particularly if you happen to be reading this in a suburban Denny’s, the kids whining about their Moons Over My Hammy, your better half Googling something on the iPhone, and you asking yourself if this could possibly be what you signed up for. But against the ochre-and-granite grandeur of Yellowstone, Jason walked toward that bear, stealing lynx-like through the underbrush, snapping a lens into his Nikon and forming a wickedly pronounced bicep as he steadied the camera and — click, click — shot.

When he eventually returned, the bear having disappeared into the forest, I was still backedpedaling. He grinned and asked, “Goin’ back for that bear already?”

The Trouble With Lip Balm

We set up a riverside base camp about eight miles in. The next morning, we’d track grizzlies into the highlands.

Jason had his tent up and our food in a bear bag and hoisted over a branch before I could wrestle my own tent out of its case. And I’d never seen anyone light a campfire as swiftly as he did. Later, as I observed him in the flickering firelight, I realized that I looked at him a bit the way Sal Paradise looked at Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac’s novel

“On the Road”: with a mix of admiration and curiosity about the Western Man.

We’d met just a week before. I was speaking at the Jackson Hole Writers Conference, and Jason attended my talk and class and then invited me to lunch. He had a book idea and wanted my opinion. When I told him that I planned to go into Yellowstone after the conference, he immediately said he’d join me.

By the campfire, I learned that he’d grown up in St. Louis but had moved to Wyoming a decade back to work as a whitewater rafting guide. As his passion for the wilderness grew, he began rock-climbing gargantuan summits and scaling glaciers with axes. Three years ago, he founded Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris, a tour company specializing in nature photography.

“You’re not wearing deodorant, are you?” he asked bluntly across the campfire. “Because grizzlies have an acute sense of smell. Even a tube of lip balm can lure them to a campsite in search of food.” I licked the Burt’s Bees Beeswax off my lips and swallowed; then I sniffed an underarm.

Luckily, before I could completely panic, Jason changed the subject. “There’s this extraordinary passage in your book, Bill, where you talk about how the Amazonian tribe you worked with doesn’t have a word for ‘nature.’” He pulled out the copy of my memoir, “Whispering in the Giant’s Ear,” that he’d bought at the conference, and read a passage.

Now, this is every author’s dream. A reader not only lugs your book deep into the wilderness, but then calls it “extraordinary” before reading your words back to you. It was practically enough to make me forget my Arid Extra Dry.

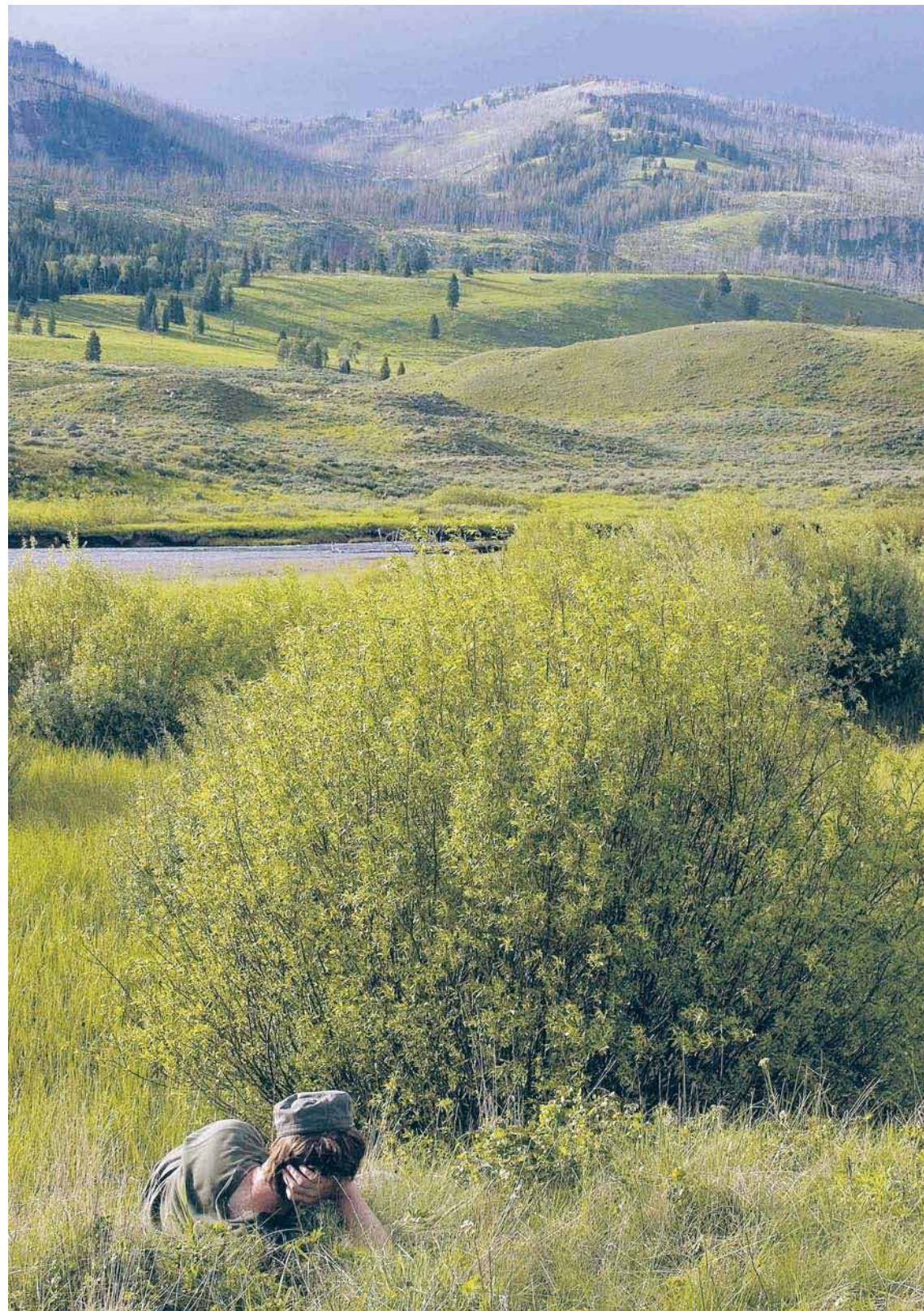
“There is no dichotomy between ‘nature’ and ‘people,’” he said earnestly. “Environmentalists are drawing false battle lines.”

“Strip malls and strip mines are natural?” I asked.

“Yes, they are,” he replied. “Because people are natural. Only when we finally see ourselves that way will we respect our place in the web.”

Later, alone in my tent, I read Doug Peacock’s “Grizzly Years” by flashlight. It wasn’t much more comforting than “Death in Yellowstone.” Peacock had returned from Vietnam a traumatized veteran, unable to adjust to domestic American life. So he in effect lived with the grizzlies. He’d be there in the early spring when the bears emerged from their north-facing slope dens; he’d track them through the summer until they went into six-month hibernation in the fall. After the intensity of Vietnam, he somehow felt truly alive in the company of predators.

I thought I heard a stick crack somewhere out in the forest and grabbed my bear spray. Grizzly claws are the size of human fingers. I pictured them ripping through the laughably thin fabric of my tent.



PHOTOS BY JASON WILLIAMS

DETAILS ● Yellowstone National Park

GETTING THERE AND GETTING AROUND

United offers round-trip flights from Dulles to Wyoming’s Jackson Hole Airport for \$511. To get around in Wyoming, you’ll need to rent a car. You can do this in advance through tour companies such as Jackson Hole Wildlife Safaris (307-690-6402, www.jacksonholewildlifesafaris.com) or at the airport.

A “backcountry” trip in Yellowstone starts and ends on foot, at a trailhead or developed area. Hiking is the best way to see the park.

WHERE TO STAY

Trapper Inn
285 N. Cache St., Jackson, 307-733-2648, www.trapperinn.com

A friendly, comfortable hotel. Rooms from \$199.

Wort Hotel
Glenwood and Broadway, Jackson, 800-322-2727, www.worthotel.com

A historic luxury hotel downtown. Its famous Silver Dollar Bar was built in 1950 and inlaid with 2,032 unrecirculated silver dollars. Rooms from \$189.

WHERE TO EAT

Gordito’s



BY GENE THORP — THE WASHINGTON POST

1180 S. U.S. Hwy. 89, Jackson, 307-734-6736

A hole-in-the-wall Mexican dive for the adventurous traveler on a shoestring. Prices from \$5.

The Blue Lion

160 N. Millward St., Jackson, 307-733-3912, www.bluelionrestaurant.com

This refurbished old house has been a local favorite for fine dining for 20 years. Entrees from \$17.50.

WHAT TO DO

National Elk Refuge

307-733-9212, www.fws.gov/nationalelkrefuge

Has the world’s largest concentration of

elk (in winter) and the largest bison herd (more than 800) in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Grand Teton National Park

307-739-3300, www.nps.gov/grte
About a half-hour drive north of Jackson. An entrance fee allows you to stay here and/or in Yellowstone National Park for seven days: \$25 per vehicle, \$12 per person for hikers and bicyclists, \$20 per motorcycle. To the north lies Jackson Lake, where most water activities are allowed with a permit.

Yellowstone National Park

307-344-7381, www.nps.gov/yell
Home to the largest concentration of mammals in the lower 48 states, including grizzly bears, black bears, wolves, lynxes, elk, bison, pronghorns, bighorn sheep and moose. All overnight backcountry trips in Yellowstone require a permit, which is free, but issued only after you watch a 15-minute video and sign some forms. Reserving a backcountry campsite costs \$20. For lodging inside Yellowstone, contact **Xanterra Parks & Resorts** at 866-439-7375.

INFORMATION

www.nps.gov, www.jacksonholechamber.com

— W.P.

What’s a can of pepper spray to North America’s fiercest predator?

Deeper Into Grizzly Territory

The next day, Jason and I climbed a mountain into an area where grizzlies might be. Out of nowhere, Jason stepped into a stream and scooped the water, unpurified, into his mouth. “It should be a human right to gulp fresh water from any stream,” he said. The water ran down his cheeks and soaked his shirt. “I’ve been building my resistance by drinking a little more each time. But our streams should be so clean that everyone can experience this.”

I was beginning to view Jason as someone in a distinctively American West tradition of what you might call liberal rednecks: rugged, backwoods, sensitive guys. Like John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey before him, Jason was animated by nature and ablaze with the desire to recapture what he saw as an endangered American ethos: a deep connection with the landscape. In the 21st century, however, men like Jason seem as endangered as grizzlies.

For hours we saw no sign of bears. For a long stretch I hardly heard any birdcalls or insect sounds, and it felt as though nature had temporarily emptied herself out. The emptiness got me thinking about

the sad fate of the Mexican grizzly, a now-extinct sister species of the North American grizzly. The Mexican grizzly used to range throughout Arizona and New Mexico but was considered a pest in frontier times because it occasionally attacked livestock. By the 1930s it had been so heavily trapped, poisoned and shot that its range was reduced to three isolated mountains. By 1960 only 30 were left, but the hunting continued until there were none. In 1964, the Mexican grizzly was officially declared extinct.

Jason and I finally hit drifts of snow that made the trail impassable, so we turned back.

The Face of a Predator

On our last afternoon in Yellowstone, I took off by myself. The sky was liquid blue over the far mountains. After an hour, a tiny sign on the trail announced that I’d crossed from Wyoming into Montana, into the park’s far northwest corner.

Just when I’d practically given up hope of seeing a griz, I heard rustling beyond the high bush and aspens to the trail’s north. My heart slammed in my rib cage. I turned around, but Jason wasn’t there to help. I unholstered my bear spray, picturing the mauled Swiss hiker. My hand shook as I released the safety.

But I didn’t backedpedal this time. I felt exhilarated in a way I hadn’t in a long time. My tongue pressed

against the back of my incisors, my muscles clenched and I held steady. I saw a patch of brown fur in the bushes, coming right toward me.

When it appeared, the animal’s chest rippled with strength, and it stood taller than me, its rack of rounded antlers arching skyward. Our eyes met — and then the moose bolted up and over a hill, absolutely terrified.

Later, back at base camp, I wondered about that moose. Why did it run when it was far bigger than I? I thought of the extinct Mexican grizzly and our factory chicken farms, and of Nietzsche’s description of man as “the beast with red cheeks.” I shook my head at the irony. I’d come all the way to the Lamar in search of a predator, when I’d been seeing one in the mirror every day.

I watched Jason a little upriver from me, the sun setting in crimson over the landscape. Three otters, a mother and two young, floated along the river past him. They scampered onto a bank and then splashed back into the slow current as Jason photographed them — a kind of benign predation.

Though I hadn’t found a griz in Yellowstone, I’d found something else, something perhaps much more valuable: a sense of humility and awe about my own place in nature.

William Powers is the author of “Blue Clay People: Seasons on Africa’s Fragile Edge.”