

Terror at Soda Butte

Grizzlies rarely attack humans with an intent to kill. Yet, tragically, a female bear became predatory two years ago at a U.S. Forest Service campground near Cooke City. Investigators still don't know why.

BY SCOTT MCMILLION



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE DURAN

Deb Freele woke with a flutter of uneasiness. Something wasn't right. Then, before she could even open her eyes, the bear chomped into her upper left arm. It didn't chew. It didn't shake its head. It didn't growl. It just kept pushing her into the ground, squeezing its jaws ever tighter, carving into the flesh a furrow you could roll a golf ball through. She heard something crack. It was loud.

She thought it was a bone breaking. Later, she would learn the grizzly had snapped off a tooth.

"It was like a vise," she said of the grizzly's grip, "getting tighter and tighter and tighter."

Freele screamed. She called out for help. "It's a bear," she yelled. "I'm being attacked by a bear."

But no help came, not for a long time. It was July 28, 2010, and she was alone in her one-person tent, her 13th night in the Soda Butte Campground a few miles from the northeastern entrance to Yellowstone National Park. Her husband was in another tent about 40 feet away. But he'd been at the rum pretty hard that night and didn't hear a thing.

Yelling wasn't working, so Freele decided to play dead. The bear loosened its grip, only to snap down again on her lower arm, squeezing with its teeth and jaws and pushing, pushing down. She heard another snap. This time, it was a bone.

She wondered: "Does it think it has me by the neck? This thing thinks it's killing me."

Pinned on her side, she couldn't reach the pepper spray beside her in the tent. She

couldn't strike out. She decided to go limp, thinking that, if the bear tried to roll her over, she'd have a chance to grab the pepper spray.

For maybe a minute, she suffered in near silence. She could see stars overhead and she could hear the bear's heavy breath, with blood or saliva gurgling in its throat.

Then she heard sounds from the next campsite. Voices in a tent. Feet scurrying to a vehicle. Doors slamming and an engine starting. Headlights flashed across her husband's silent tent.

And the bear went away.

"It dropped me and I didn't move an eyelash," Freele, 58, told me later from her home in London, Ontario. "I was afraid it would pounce on me."

The car from the neighboring campsite stopped and a window opened. "We're getting help," somebody said. It was a family with young children. Too terrified to leave the car, they drove around the campground's upper loop, honking the horn and trying to rouse somebody. Most people ignored them, suspecting drunks or hooligans, likely.

Freele lay there alone, in the dark, her tent demolished, her arm shredded like a

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chicken wing, not knowing where that bear had gone. She took the safety off her bear spray and sat partway up. It would be 20 minutes before the neighbors came back with help.

Freele didn't know it at the time, but she wasn't the bear's first victim. A few minutes earlier, at about 2 a.m., and a few hundred yards upstream on the creek that runs through the campground, the grizzly had attacked another tent. Though the tent contained two people and a dog, the bear moved it a few feet before biting through the fabric and sinking its teeth into the leg of Ronald Singer, a 21-year-old former high school wrestler who came up swinging while his girlfriend began to scream. The sharp blows and the racket helped the bear change its mind and it didn't stick around. Neither did Singer. His girlfriend's parents drove him to Cooke City, looking for medical help. Freele saw them drive by her camp, but they didn't stop, probably didn't even know the bear had struck again.

After these two attacks, the grizzly—a scrawny animal supporting three yearling cubs—kept moving downstream along Soda Butte Creek until she hit the camp of Kevin Kammer, of Grand Rapids, Michigan. All but three of the Soda Butte Campground's 27 sites contained campers that night, most of them in tents. Kammer's site, number 26, was one of the most isolated. The closest campsite was 60 yards away. It was very dark out, and the nearby stream masked noises. Nobody saw or heard a thing.

And nobody found his body until a couple of hours later, after campers had raised the alarm and a Park County Sheriff's deputy, with a spotlight and a loudspeaker, began rousting campers, ordering them to leave. He found a ghastly scene. The bear had pulled Kammer from his tent by the head and shoulders; the camper had bled to death within 4 feet of the tent, investigators determined. Then the bear pulled his body another 10 yards, and that's where the deputy found

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him, his torso partially consumed by the sow grizzly and her cubs.

By that time, Montana game wardens, sheriff deputies, and staff from the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service, most of them armed, had sent the groggy campers on their way. Most left their gear on the ground for the night. Dawn dragged its heels that morning.

NO EXPLANATION

"What made her cross that line that night will haunt me forever," Kevin Frey told me. He is a bear management specialist in the Yellowstone area for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. I've interviewed him many times in 20 years of reporting about Yellowstone, and relied on him as a source for my book, *Mark of the Grizzly: True Stories of Recent Bear Attacks and the Hard Lessons Learned*. I've learned to count on him for honest, reliable information. Like me, he cares about grizzly bears and wild country. He takes no joy in having to kill a bear.

And he works really hard. In normal years, he helps landowners bear-proof their properties and, during elk hunting season, might have to crawl through dense brush looking for a grizzly bear wounded by a surprised hunter. Last year, when a late spring meant poor crops of natural food and far-ranging bears in late summer, he worked more than two months without a day off, trying to solve problems.

Frey has investigated dozens of grizzly attacks over the years. He's trapped and handled scores of bears and made an effort to educate thousands of people about living safely in bear country. He said he'd never seen an incident like this one. Analyze most grizzly attacks, and you'll find some sort of explanation: A hunter spooks one out of a daybed, a photographer pushes his luck, a hapless hiker winds up between the bear and her cubs or a carcass it is protecting, or somebody has fed the bear, teaching it to view humans as a source of food.

But none of that happened in this case. Frey's report, compiled in the weeks after the attack, pieced together what happened. But it couldn't tell us why.

"There is no clear explanation for the aggressive, predatory behavior," the report says.

It does rule out a number of factors. At



CAMP CLOSED After a camper's body was discovered the next morning, local, state, and federal officials evacuated the campground. At around 6 p.m. later that same day, the grizzly returned to the campsite where the attack occurred and was captured in a culvert trap.

220 pounds, the bear was small for its age, though not abnormally so. The cubs were undersized, but not starving. The mother carried an average load of parasites. She probably had lived near the campground for all her life, at least 10 years. She knew where it was, had seen it and smelled it and mostly shunned it.

She was not rabid. She was not in the habit of eating garbage, or horse feed or bird seed or somebody's lunch. Relatively new technology allows scientists to identify, by analyzing the isotopes in hair, the main ingredients of a bear's diet from the previous two years. This one had lived almost exclusively on vegetation, unlike most Yellowstone-area bears, which consume plenty of meat. Sometime in

the previous few weeks, she'd been eating meat, though not much of it.

None of the people attacked that night had any food or other attractants in their tents to tempt a bear's sensitive nose. Everybody had secured all food and utensils in their vehicles or the bearproof boxes at each campsite.

The bear had never been trapped or tranquilized, and she had no history of aggression toward people. The only known encounter had come a few days earlier when a woman, jogging on a highway near the park entrance, surprised the bear family along the road. The startled mother grizzly offered a bluff charge, then backed off when the jogger stopped running and started

yelling at her. The bear's behavior was typical: She was being protective, not predatory.

And if anybody in the Cooke City area had problems with grizzly bears grabbing garbage or other food that summer, they did not report it.

Rumors circulated that a local photographer had been feeding the bears, which could have taught them to associate humans with food. Investigators chased leads but could find no evidence of such bear baiting. And the hair analysis ruled out any significant amount of human or livestock food.

Though it took a while to sort out these details, the evidence that Frey and FWP warden captain Sam Sheppard found on the ground made for a clear case, one as unusual as it was grim: This grizzly bear was treating people like food, like prey. And for that, she had to die. Anybody who pays any attention in grizzly country knows you should never, ever, give a bear a food reward. You don't do it on purpose, and you don't let it happen accidentally. It just teaches them to look for more of the same. And this bear and her cubs had found a food reward in a person they killed.

By 6 p.m. on July 28, about 16 hours after Kammer's death, the bear had returned to camp, where Frey had draped the rain fly from Kammer's tent over a culvert trap just 6 feet from where the father of four had died. She climbed into the steel container, looking for more food, and the door slammed shut behind her. Within another 12 hours, Frey had captured all three cubs, too.

While Frey's team already knew this had been a predatory attack—an effort to make a meal of people—they waited for definitive proof that they had the right bear. The next day, some deft work by a crime lab in neighboring Wyoming made sure Frey and his crew had what they needed: DNA from hairs gathered at the attack site matched DNA from the bear in the trap. Plus, the snapped tooth in Freele's tent matched a broken canine on the mother bear. Frey and Sheppard had the right bear.

Less than two hours later, the plunger dropped on a big hypodermic and the mother bear nodded into death. Her cubs will spend their life in the Billings zoo.

Frey and Sheppard said they have no

AP PHOTO/THE BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE, NICK WOLCOTT

regrets about the decision to put the mother bear down. Bears that learn to rely on things like garbage and pet food cause problems enough. A bear that has killed and eaten a person cannot be tolerated.

BLAMING THE VICTIM

News of the attacks spread quickly around the world. Media in Europe, China, and Australia covered it. For some reason, many people felt more sympathy for the bear than for the man she killed. Some grew livid. Hundreds of e-mails poured into FWP offices, enough to clog servers. Some blamed Kammer for being there. Others put on a stupefying display of ignorance and fantasy.

“The bear had been to the area before the campers were there and when she noticed a strange presence she immediately went into survival mode, doing what was necessary to ensure the protection of her cubs,” wrote a woman, who offered to lock herself in a room with the bear to prove “it won’t purposely kill me.”

“What a bunch of morons!!!!,” wrote another. “The mother bear and cubs were simply looking for food in their natural habitat.”

“I will always think of Montana as a backward, anti-animal state who will murder a mother bear, orphan her three cubs because stupid arrogant people have to holiday in the wilderness,” wrote one poster.

“You will burn in hell for murdering God’s beloved creations,” wrote another.

Off in the blogosphere, things got even worse. People even took shots at Kammer in the comments section of an on-line obituary.

Investigators saw it differently.

“That man deserves nothing but respect and sympathy,” Sheppard said of Kammer.

I agree with him.

Kammer, 48, had taken a break from a career as a medical technologist to be a stay-at-home dad to his four kids, the youngest just 9 and the oldest 19. Two of them attended a Christian school. His family chose not to comment for this story, but news accounts and comments from friends provide at least a partial picture. Dedicated to his family, he was the kind of dad who showed up at school board meetings when a decision affected his kids. When coworkers had a bad day, they could count on the affable and



STILL PUZZLED Bozeman-based FWP bear specialist Kevin Frey says there’s almost always a reasonable explanation for a grizzly attack. Someone gets too close to a mother bear and her cubs, or somebody surprises a bear on a trail. To this day, he and other bear experts cannot explain why the grizzly went on a rampage that night at Soda Butte Campground.

friendly Kammer to elicit a laugh. He liked fishing and camping and kayaking, fixing up the house, and relaxing in the hot tub.

His camp was clean. His food was properly stored. He wasn’t in the wilderness; he was in a campground, a few feet from his car, a place with toilets and picnic tables and improved roads. Though surrounded by wild country, this place was built for people. He did nothing wrong. Yet doofuses on the Internet, cloaked in anonymity, felt free to criticize him.

Freele said she was in the ambulance on the way to a hospital in Cody, Wyoming, when she learned there had been more attacks, that a man had died. Until that point, she’d felt that she was the unlucky one. She knew she was in bear country and had done everything right. She never cooked on the fire pit, not wanting to leave any food residue in there. She kept her camp stove and food locked away. She didn’t use any lotions, and she changed her clothes before going to bed. She always kept her bear spray handy, and if she found fresh bear sign on her daily fishing trips, she went elsewhere. She followed all the rules, yet for some reason the bear chose her tent that night. She has no doubt it was trying to make a meal of her.

Anonymous commenters on the Internet

attacked her, too.

“That bothered me,” she told me, but not as much as the knowledge that Kammer died nearby.

She wonders, now, if she couldn’t have helped. She hopes he didn’t suffer. She worries about his family. She wonders if she couldn’t have tried harder to reach her pepper spray, if she couldn’t have maybe chased the grizzly away, into the woods, away from people.

“Survivor’s guilt, I guess,” is the way she summed it up.

INCREDIBLE RARITY

Somebody gets nailed in grizzly country every year. Almost always, they survive these attacks by animals that can take down a bull elk or an Angus steer, though the injuries can be gruesome. This, more than anything, refutes the myth that grizzlies are manhunters that lust for human flesh. If they wanted to kill us, they could do it in short order.

Attacks like the ones at the Soda Butte Campground remain incredibly rare. The last time anything similar happened in the Greater Yellowstone Area was in 1984, when Bigitta Fredenhagen, of Basel, Switzerland, died in the park’s remote Pelican Valley. Like Kammer, she had kept a clean camp and obeyed the rules, but a bear dragged her from



ZERO TOLERANCE Sam Sheppard, FWP warden captain in Bozeman, had no qualms about the department’s decision to quickly dispatch the grizzly after it had been trapped. “We couldn’t put a bear out there that we knew had cost somebody their life,” he said.

her tent and ate much of her body anyway.

“Bears very rarely exhibit that kind of behavior,” Sheppard said. “But every one of them is capable of it.”

That’s why the official response at Soda Butte was swift and immediate. Bear managers don’t want to give bears a chance to repeat such intolerable behavior. Cynics respond that fear of lawsuits drives such decisions. I don’t think it’s that simple.

“There’s a need to keep the community safe,” Sheppard said. “We couldn’t put a bear out there that we knew had cost somebody their life.”

Not everybody buys that reasoning, as witnessed by the outpouring of invective over the death of the Soda Butte bear. Some people argue that killing an innocent man in a campground should not warrant a death sentence for a bear.

What these people fail to realize is that killing that bear might have saved other bears. Too often, hunters and hikers kill bears that seem threatening. In 2010, people killed at least 49 grizzlies in and near Yellowstone. That’s nearly a record number (the record occurred in 2008), and at least 18 of those deaths remained “under investigation” by the end of the year. If the Soda Butte grizzly had been released, how many more bears would be killed by people convinced that every bear is that maneater?

Grizzly advocates—and I count myself among them—deserve to squirm over the events at Soda Butte Campground.

Two people suffered serious injuries and a man died. None of them did anything wrong. These weren’t garbage bears. It wasn’t a surprise encounter. It was a deadly, predatory attack.

As we move on with the seemingly interminable disputes over Endangered Species Act protections for grizzlies, as we argue over which places and under which conditions the growing population of grizzlies should roam, as we contemplate mathematical models and political theories and a raft of other abstractions, let’s keep this in mind: Kevin Kammer was a real person with a real family. He’s gone now. And we don’t know why.

That’s not an abstraction.

It’s as real as it gets. 🐻

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