

MARK OF THE BEAST

BY BRUCE MASTERMAN

The grizzly left him disfigured, but that hasn't turned outdoorsman Ray Walker against bears. Far from it

THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS IN SOUTHWESTERN Alberta watch over a remote, unpopulated chunk of wild land with a near-mystical, siren-like attraction to a certain breed of outdoor enthusiast. For here you can go all day without seeing another person, set up your tent wherever you please, follow game trails unmarked by human signs and fish places visited by few.

Ray Walker was one of those people. It was more than 20 years ago now that he was first drawn to the ridges, the wildness and the trout that inhabit the region's high mountain lakes and clear streams. He spent countless hours alone on the old logging roads and ridgelines, seeking those hidden gems of water that held native westslope cutthroat trout, as well as introduced golden trout.

The fish were certainly among the rewards for hours of pushing his trim, five-foot 10-inch, 160-pound frame up the scree-covered avalanche slopes and steep ridges. And the names of the lakes he fished reflected the area's nature: North Fork, Rainy Ridge, Grizzly.

"Fishing was just one reason I was there," he says, revealing he also dreamed of one day running into a living legend whom he'd long admired, the late Andy Russell. The famous author and outdoorsman grew up nearby and regularly hiked and rode horseback over the same vast region bordering the Alberta-B.C. border northwest of Waterton Lakes National Park.

In fact, the area became the setting for many of Russell's books, including *Grizzly Country*, in which he displayed an admiration for grizzlies leavened with caution. "There are a thousand ways to get into trouble in the mountains," he wrote, "but few of them are as dramatic or as spectacular as a nose-to-nose confrontation with a grizzly."

Although Walker never did meet Russell, those words came glaringly, painfully true one day in 1998. That's when Walker unwittingly encountered a grizzly sow with two cubs, provoking a bloody attack. His life didn't end that day, but what happened to him you wouldn't wish upon your worst enemy.

JULY 13, 1998, was warm and sunny. Walker, then a 65-year-old retired widower recovering from open-heart surgery, was hiking back to his van after four days of backcountry rambling. While walking through some thick alders, he sang loudly as a precaution against bears. Then the trail opened up, and he stopped singing.

Approaching a creek lined with alders, Walker spotted a dark brown grizzly about 50 feet away. Almost instantly, a half-grown cub appeared beside her, followed by a second cub emerging from the alders, standing on its hind legs to see him better. "I didn't have time to think at all," he calmly recalls 12 years later, sitting in the kitchen of his Calgary bachelor apartment. "But I knew I was in trouble when I saw the cubs."

The sow turned briefly, as if to walk away, but in a flash turned back and came for Walker, soundlessly covering the distance between them in three great bounds. Walker was still standing when the bear swiped a massive, scimitar-clawed front paw at his head. The blow removed his left eye, nose and half his right eyelid. Knocked unconscious, he landed face down.

He awoke to the bear biting the top of his head, and when he interlocked his

hands to protect the back of his neck, the bear bit through a finger. Walker willed himself to remain silent and motionless, hoping the grizzly would realize he was no longer a threat. It worked. A few seconds later, the biting stopped and he sensed the bear was gone.

When Walker tentatively raised his head to look around, the sow was nowhere to be seen. He immediately knew what he had to do. "My only thought was to get out of there while I was alive." Standing, he soon realized he could no longer see properly. He dabbed his remaining eye with a tissue, clearing the streaming blood until he could see enough to differentiate between trail and trees.

Having not come across another soul all day, Walker knew he had to save himself. He immediately started walking the remaining three kilometres back to his parked van, stopping often to wipe blood away so he could see. After what seemed a lifetime, he reached his van and somehow managed to drive 30 kilometres over rough, dirt logging roads, gravel roads and finally paved highway to a store in the village of Beaver Mines. "This man must have had a will of iron to make it out from where he was," a local RCMP officer was later quoted as saying. "He's one tough cookie."

From the store, a customer drove Walker to meet an ambulance speeding from Pincher Creek. Then a small plane rushed him to Foothills Hospital in Calgary, 200 kilometres to the north. Despite all this frantic activity and despite the pain, what stands out most in Walker's memory is something he told an RCMP officer: "Whatever happens to me, please don't let that bear be killed. She was only protecting her cubs."

AS it turned out, provincial Fish and Wildlife officers closed the area

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for several days, but they agreed the sow should not be destroyed because it had been a defensive attack, not a predatory one. Such is not always the case.

Four weeks later, as Walker recovered in a Calgary hospital, another southern Alberta angler, Christopher Kress, was mauled to death by a male grizzly while he fished in the South Castle River, not far from Beaver Mines. Government records show the attack started on the riverbank and ended in the middle of the river. The man's friends, camping nearby, shot and killed the 200-pound bruin, which investigators concluded had deliberately targeted the anglers as prey—a rarer type of attack.

Lying in his hospital bed for seven long, heavily medicated weeks, Walker had plenty of time to relive his ordeal, and to try to figure out how things went so horribly wrong that day. He realizes he should have been making more noise as he hiked. He also thinks the bear wouldn't have done as much damage if he'd fallen to the ground before she hit him. Using bear spray likely would have deterred the animal, too, but he doubts he would have had time to unholster it.

Walker endured three major operations. Doctors removed skin from his left forearm and bone from his forehead, using it to rebuild his nose and repair the heavily damaged left side of his face. For a while, whenever he touched his nose, it felt as if he were touching his forehead. The grafted skin, as it set, had a lighter complexion than the rest of his face. It still does. Although doctors couldn't do anything about his missing left eye, they managed to sew up his right eyelid. By the time it was all over, Walker had lost more than 25 pounds off his already wiry frame.



Now, 11 years later, the 76-year-old still bears the attack's physical scars. In stores, people stare at his disfigured face, and sometimes children screw up the courage to ask him what happened. He tells them he was in an accident. If he recounted the whole story, he believes, they would grow up with an unreasonable fear of bears, instead of a healthy respect.

CHANGED MAN: Ray Walker before and after his fateful encounter with a sow grizzly

While recuperating, Walker

BEAR SMARTS

WHILE THE ODDS of a grizzly bear attack are slim, there are some things you can do to even lower the chances of a run-in. And if the unthinkable does happen, you still have a fighting chance. When heading into bear country, heed this advice from Alberta Sustainable Resource Development.

- ➔ If you're fishing, regularly shout to make your presence known, and keep bear spray within reach. Also make lots of noise when walking along trails.
- ➔ Keep an eye out for fresh sign, such as tracks, claw marks and scat.
- ➔ If you spot a grizzly and it doesn't see you, keep an eye on it and quietly back away. If it does see you, get your bear spray ready, avert your eyes, talk softly to the bear and slowly back away while looking for a tall, strong tree to climb if you have to.
- ➔ If the grizzly charges, stand fast and prepare to use the spray. Don't yell; the bear may perceive it as aggression.
- ➔ If you're about to be attacked and can't climb a tree, drop face down on the ground, interlock your hands to protect your neck, keep your legs spread and play dead. Once the attack stops, don't move until the grizzly has left.



kept thinking about how he could put a positive spin on the attack. The only thing he could come up with was that he needed to help educate people about staying safe in bear country. He has since published articles, spoken to outdoors groups and schools, and appeared in bear safety videos—all in the hope that even one person might avoid the ordeal he went through.

As the father of a now grown daughter and the grandfather to two grandsons, ages 13 and 14, he also says he respects the sow grizzly's decision to protect her cubs. Her actions, he still believes, were natural, not aggressive. "She wasn't trying to kill me," he says. "She was trying to control the situation." Just as Walker is today.

RAY WALKER (WALKER); BRUCE MASTERMAN (WALKER, POST ATTACK); MANUFACTURER (SPRAY); KELLY SUTHERLAND (ILLUSTRATION); CDC (TAPEWORM, TICK, GIARDIA)

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO... CRASH INTO A MOOSE

IT was early last June, about 11:40 at night, and I was driving my new Suburban from Milton, Ontario, up to North Bay, where I planned to help raise money the next morning for Tim Hortons Camp Day for underprivileged kids. I was just north of Callander—I could see the lights of North Bay—in an area where there's been a lot of road construction in recent years.

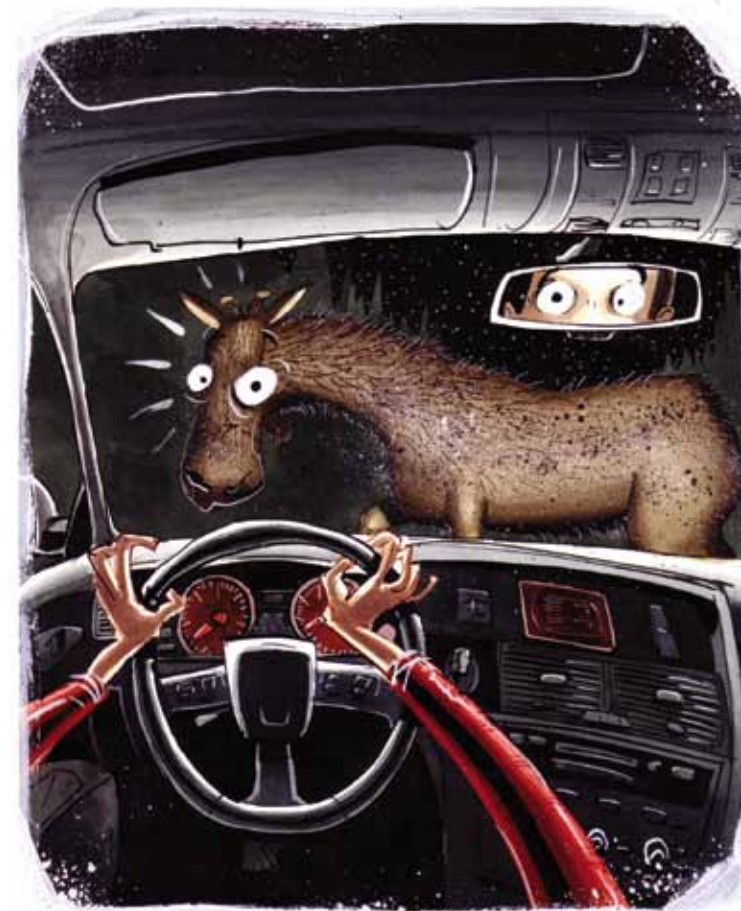
I was driving along at the speed limit, about 90 km/h, when literally out of the corner of my eye, I saw a moose come out of the pitch dark. It was about an 800-pound animal, a young bull, and it ran full trot right in front of me. Talk about timing—the front of the truck hit it perfectly broadside. Afterwards, you could see the hair marks from its legs on the bumper on either side of the licence plate.

It happened so quickly, I didn't even hit the brakes. And the impact was so incredible, it almost stopped the truck. The moose ended up dead in the ditch while I coasted along at about 10 km/h for another 80 metres or so.

There was a lot of damage. The grill was smashed and the hood was squashed back, making it very difficult to see out the windshield. The impact also smashed the headlights and tore out the battery, so the engine quit running. Without the power steering, I struggled to get over to the shoulder. Once stopped, I had to crawl into the back seat to get out—both front doors were jammed shut because the two front quarter panels had been pushed back. In all, there was about \$20,000 worth of damage.

Looking back, I would say that if that moose had run out one or two seconds sooner, I could have potentially swerved to miss it. But then I could have hit the rockcut. I'll never know what my reaction would have been if I had mere seconds more to think about it. And what if we had collided a split-second later? The moose would have run right into my door and knocked me out of the driver's seat. Any sooner or later, and the impact could have been truly devastating.

If I had not been driving a truck, meanwhile, I'm sure the moose would have been on my lap; I can now see why people



in cars lose their lives when they hit such a big animal. Driving a truck saved my life that night, for sure.

What I found truly surprising is how many moose and deer get hit in the north. When I brought my truck to the auto-body shop in North Bay, for example, most of the other vehicles they were working on had also run into animals. It's clearly a serious danger, so when you see those moose crossing signs, pay attention.

It could happen to anybody.

—Bob Izumi

WICKED wildlife

9 critters that can put you at risk



[1] DEER TICK

THE RISK: Officially known as the black-legged tick, its bite can transmit Lyme disease, a bacterial infection causing fever, headache and fatigue. The infection can spread to joints, the heart and central nervous system, causing serious, chronic complications. **AVOID**

BY: Wearing a hat, long sleeves and long pants tucked into your boots, and applying insect repellent with DEET. After bushwhack-

ing, check your entire body for ticks or the telltale bull's eye rash from a bite. Remove an embedded tick whole with pointy tweezers: grip it by the head as close to your skin as possible and slowly pull it straight up. Keep the tick for testing and see a doctor, as Lyme disease symptoms may not show up for months.

[2] BROAD FISH TAPEWORM

THE RISK: The largest human-hosted tapeworm,



Diphyllobothrium latum enters the digestive system via raw or undercooked fish. Present in the Great Lakes region, central Canada and Pacific northwest, it's most commonly found in salmon, as well as in whitefish, trout, pike and walleye. Symptoms include abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, vomiting and weight loss, although

hosts can be asymptomatic for years. **AVOID BY:** Not snacking directly out of the livewell; thoroughly cook your catch or freeze it at -10°C for 24 to 48 hours.

[3] GIARDIA LAMBLIA

THE RISK: This microscopic protozoan parasite (right) causes giardiasis, an intestinal infection commonly known as beaver fever. Contracted from water or surfaces contaminated by an infected animal or human feces, the illness causes nausea, diarrhea and stomach cramps, which can lead to dangerously rapid dehydration. **AVOID BY:** Never ingesting untreated water,



and avoiding close contact with someone who's infected.

[4] TRICHINELLA

THE RISK: Found in wild game, especially bears and boars, this parasitic roundworm causes trichinosis. Symptoms start with nausea, vomiting and intestinal discomfort, quickly progressing to headaches, fever, chills, and joint and muscle pain. Severe cases can lead to mobility disorders, and even heart and breathing problems. **AVOID BY:** Cooking wild game meat

thoroughly, and carefully cleaning meat grinders and other tools after use. Freezing, curing, drying, smoking or microwaving meat does not consistently kill the organism.

[5] UNGULATES

THE RISK: During rutting season, normally reclusive bull moose and elk transform into giant, hormone-crazed aggressors. They become highly unpredictable and may charge with little warning; injuries from goring, stomping and kicking can result. **AVOID BY:** Giving the animal space—at least 25

yards. If its ears lay back, it may charge; the same goes if the hairs on a moose's hump rise. In either case, run—the animal won't chase you for very far—and get behind something solid.

[6] COUGARS

THE RISK: Cougar attacks have increased markedly since the 1970s owing to rebounding populations and human encroachment on cougar habitat. Attacks are most prevalent in late spring and summer, as hungry, inexperienced juveniles search for new territory. Cougars kill their prey by