

The Bear Scare

October 2009

Several years ago my brother-in-law told me of a secluded unnamed lake in the Sawtooth Wilderness that he called Teddy Lake. The lake was far from any trailhead. He used horses to get close to it and camp. He would then day hike into the lake from camp on a cross-country scramble. He always found himself alone with his party reeling in behemoths lurking in the depths.

After years of wondering where this hidden gem existed, he told me. After looking over the maps and studying the terrain, I resolved that I would have overlooked this place as one of my Idaho adventures. Teddy Lake instantly surfaced to the top of my list of backcountry adventures but would have to wait until after my busy summer.

This hike should require a night in the wilderness and probably two to enjoy it fully but due to the lack of time and not wanting to wait another year, I decided to tackle it on a day hike. I've covered long distances and elevation gain in the past and this would test that ability. I prepared hard this year for my trip to the Wind Rivers in Wyoming and felt it was doable. Fall hiking is great because the heat doesn't zap your energy and the anticipation of fishing a secret lake full of large hungry Trout getting ready for winter boosts moral.

It was a beautiful crisp morning as I arrived at the trailhead after commuting from home the same morning. The frost in the air encouraged me to get moving up the trail to get warm. Having forgotten my gloves I traded off my fly rod from hand to hand to keep the other hand warm in my pocket. The small pack I carried was not big enough to carry my fly rod.

After several miles and a fork in the trail I found myself hiking along a creek through some heavy brush. Even though I had not seen any signs at this point the thought occurred to me that this is Bear country. I had faced off with a Black Bear in the past while hiking in the Boise foothills and didn't care for a repeat. In my haste for the long road ahead I forged along not taking necessary precautions.

As I continued along the trail, I was startled by a crashing of brush a short distance away. I looked in the direction of the sound and could see the bending brush as the animal cleared the vicinity. I realized it had to be a Bear because a Deer or Elk would have been tall enough to see and the crashing was too loud for a smaller mammal.

I decided to walk over and climb a small rock outcropping to get a better view. After several minutes of sitting I noticed a medium sized Black Bear leaving the brush and climbing the canyon wall. He looked back and watched me for a while and then vacated the area.



I hadn't given the Bear encounter much attention other than it was a nice highlight to the trip. Bear encounters have been somewhat common for me while traveling in Idaho but it does enhance the experience viewing them on foot versus from the safety of a truck. It did bother me a little that I did get so close that I startled the Bear. Most of the time, Bears will detect humans and flee long before we have the opportunity to see them.

I continued up the trail eager to validate the size of fish that I heard were in the lake. I was looking for the next trail intersection making sure I didn't miss it. As I rounded a big bush I froze in my tracks. Through the bush I could see a big brown mass of fur. Realization hit me that I was at the mercy of a large cinnamon brown Black Bear as he whirled his head around. It was a large boar based on the fact that it was the largest Black Bear I have seen and not because I was only 20 ft away. I had not even been this close to a Bear in a zoo.

He stared through the brush at me for what seemed like an eternity. A second seems like an eternity in that situation. I could see an ear and most of its lower body. I know that it could see my arm and lower body. It was a waiting game to see what would happen. The last thing I wanted to do was startle it so I remained quiet and motionless.

I had experienced this situation before but the Bear was not this big and I wasn't this close. Despite my predicament, I did not feel the terror that I felt the last time this happened. I think it helped that I researched Bear behavior since my last encounter.

I was relatively calm for the situation not to say that my heart wasn't racing. I was just happy that there wasn't a cub around or I may have been terrified. It was a pretty intense wait but it did what I thought it would do. After about twenty seconds it turned its head and wandered off through the brush. The body rippled with muscle and hair as I peeked around the bush getting an excellent view. I left wondering if it actually saw me but it had to have seen me. Why didn't it bolt if it did see me? Why did both Bears I saw not seem distraught with my presence? Maybe it was the fact that they could see me and realize I wasn't a threat. I'll never know.

It was a very cool experience. The more I'm around them the less I fear but gain a better respect. The thing I learned is that if I was taking the necessary precautions I would never have been in that situation.

I soon left the low brushy area as I now began climbing. I realized I had to return the same way and I was going to make sure it wasn't in the dark and without noise.

After many miles I neared the area where I left the trail. I could see several large Granite basins. I studied the map to get my bearings and proceeded cross-country.



After a few stops so that I could look at the map, I realized I was not carrying my fly rod. I had sat it down to look at the map. Being occupied with directions and normally packing my rod in my backpack I did not think to pick it up.

I traced my steps but it was useless in the thick trees. I only remembered general directions since I wasn't on a trail. I searched the vicinity for a few hours but to no avail. I decided to chalk it up as a loss because I was just getting frustrated at that point. I decided not to sweat the small stuff and take away the positive experience I had with the Bear.

I returned the way I came being within a mile climb to the lake. I thought about going to the lake anyway but decided to save the anticipation for another year with a new fly rod in hand. Verifying the tales of behemoths that doubled the rod would have to wait for another day.

I made my way back down the trail making lots of noise and returning to the truck having seen very little wildlife. I may have over done it on the noise!

It was definitely memorable to have such an encounter with a Bear of that size at that distance. The feelings I felt and the view through the bush at a feared predator is indescribable and will be etched into my soul forever.

