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# A Life Lesson in Denali Park

*A grizzly bear follows a camper*

**J. Robert Harris**



EVERYTHING WAS GOING GREAT UNTIL I SAW THE GRIZZLY. IT WAS HUGE, cinnamon-brown, heavily muscled, and looking right at me, but the scariest part was that I had seen this same bear a few hours earlier. I now realized it was following me.

It was early September in Denali National Park. The camper bus left the visitor center and rumbled leisurely down the unpaved park road into the backcountry. Off in the distance, snowcapped mountains under a bright blue sky offered a postcard-perfect panorama. Fifty-two miles out, the bus abruptly stopped, and the driver announced that I was at my drop-off spot, a place with a somewhat disquieting name, I Scream Gulch. From here I would be backpacking five days and four nights to explore the headwaters of the East Branch of the Toklat River. The bus pulled away and soon disappeared down the dusty road. I was now alone.

The East Branch, in the park's Backcountry Unit 9, is known for its classic mountain scenery and access to large expanses of alpine tundra deep in the Alaska Range. The wide-open valley is surrounded by high, rugged peaks and slopes of alpine tundra that come right down to the river. There are large glaciers and extensive glacial moraines at the headwaters, and the entire unit is above treeline.

I dropped down into the gulch and was soon at the Toklat River and heading upstream on the gravel bar along the bank. That's when I first saw the bear. It was out among the braided channels of the river, several hundred yards off in the distance. Up on its hind legs and facing me, I was certain it had picked up my scent and knew I was there. Having backpacked extensively in grizzly country, I am not particularly intimidated when I see a bear, and this one showed no sign of hostility and was not making any move toward me. Nevertheless, I was acutely aware that I was on my own and armed with nothing more than an aerosol can of repellent. The bear watched me as I hiked along the riverbank until I rounded a bend and was out of sight.

Late that afternoon, as the sun dipped behind the distant ridge and it started getting colder, I found a nice place to camp and got set up. That's when I saw the bear again. It was out there on a gravel bar, and this time much closer, about a hundred yards. It was standing still and looking dead at me, and even though it wasn't doing anything aggressive, its obvious interest in me was disconcerting and I was starting to feel apprehensive. We watched

*The author was too preoccupied to film the grizzly bear that stood watching him, but it would have looked like this bear wandering in Denali National Park.* NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



*J. R. Harris's campsite near the Toklat River.* J. R. HARRIS

each other for a long time. I was waiting for it to move off, but it didn't move. It just stayed there, staring at me.

The day became darker and colder. I was getting hungry but was reluctant to start fixing and eating my dinner; I was fully focused on watching the bear. Disturbing thoughts of a potentially unpleasant encounter were creeping into my head. Then, suddenly, I looked up and the bear was gone. The feeling of relief was so intense it surprised me; I didn't realize I had been that uneasy. But just before nightfall, I looked again and saw that the bear had returned. It was no closer than before, but it was there, it wasn't going anywhere, and soon it would be too dark to see it. Now I was scared.

Moving quickly, I gathered everything I had that was even faintly odorous and put it in a stuff sack. I took the bag, along with my food container, and stashed them on the tundra away from my campsite. Then I got into the tent, zipped the door shut, and waited. Sleep was out of the question. Sitting there in total darkness, I waited for something bad to happen. I felt trapped in the



confines of my little cloth shelter, worried that the bear might attack at any moment. I imagined that it might be creeping closer, that it might be right outside. All I could do was hold on to my bear spray and hope I wouldn't have to use it. Waiting there in the dark was horrible. I was hungry, cold, and tired, but mostly I was terrified. It was one of the worst nights of my life.

When it was finally light enough to see, I unzipped my door and cautiously stepped outside. The bear was gone. It sounds like a cliché now, but I remember thinking how glad I was to be alive. A big bowl of oatmeal and a mug of hot coffee helped restore my composure. Soon I was packed and hiking again. It was a gorgeous day, and the scenery around the Toklat headwaters was spectacular. A few days later I got back to the park road without incident and waited for a bus heading back to the visitor center.

I often think about that bear, wondering why it was so curious about me. I suppose I will never really know, but I now appreciate more fully that this wilderness was the bear's home, and I was simply a visitor. As hikers and campers, we enter a backcountry habitat uninvited, at the time and place of our choosing, and we stay as long as we please, often without considering the environment and how our presence can alter its pristine beauty or the lives of the creatures who live there. The lesson I learned is that I should always be respectful of the ecosystem I am visiting, that I should leave no evidence of my visit, and should depart with only memories, photos, and my rubbish. As I look back at this incident, it occurs to me that this bear had every right to be curious about me. Wouldn't you be curious if a stranger came into your home?

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J. ROBERT HARRIS, a lifelong New York City resident, has completed more than 50 unsupported multi-week treks in wilderness areas around the world since 1966. He was elected to the Explorers Club in 1993 and authored *Way Out There: Adventures of a Wilderness Trekker* (Mountaineers Books, 2017). His JRH Marketing Services is the oldest African American-owned research and consulting firm in the United States.

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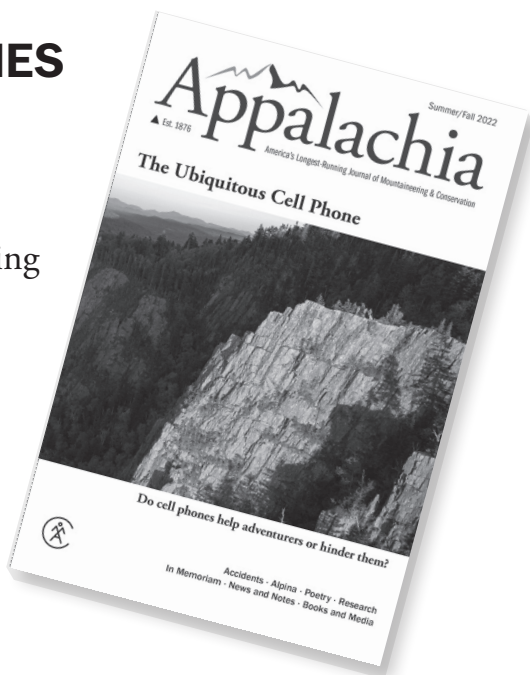
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