

Tales of a federal wildlife officer: Brown bears at Russian River

by Chris Johnson



Yearling brown bear cubs near the Russian River Ferry recently (credit: USFWS/Matt Conner).

The opening of this year's sockeye fishery on at the Kenai/Russian River confluence brought reports of two yearling brown bear cubs making regular appearances along the shoreline downstream of the Russian River Ferry. The two cubs appear to be trying to make it on their own, with no sow thus far seen accompanying them. In so doing, they are eating fish carcasses, coming too close to humans and generally just being bears in a location with a lot of people.

This situation reminds me of another incident over

a decade ago. On July 31, 2005, a Federal Wildlife Officer (FWO) was on routine patrol near the Russian River when he heard several shots and set off toward the sound. He came upon two anglers with a rifle. They told him that they had fired the gun to scare away a family of bears fishing in the area. They assured the FWO that they did not shoot the bears. While it is legal to discharge a firearm in the defense of life or property, it is not legal to discharge a firearm to “scare” away a bear in the Russian River area. This is due to safety

issues associated with discharging a firearm in an area with a large number of anglers/visitors in close proximity. Wanting to gather more information before taking any action, the FWO recorded their information.

Two days later, on August 2, 2005, I received a report from Alaska State Trooper Dispatch of a possible bear mauling at the Russian River confluence with the Kenai River. Anglers had reported a “godawful” bear roaring sound in head high grass next to the river bank and a backpack and fishing pole were seen laying in the area. I responded, taking my 12-gauge shotgun loaded with slugs along with some extra ammo. I took the ferry across the river and started hiking up-river along the high bank on the south side of the river. When I reached the Russian River, I took a bear trail above the river bank. There were numerous signs of recent bear activity on the trail.

Making plenty of noise, shotgun readied, I cautiously proceeded upstream. Coming around a bend in the trail, I noticed a torn up tree stump. Stopping, I saw a brown bear head poking around the base of a large cottonwood tree on the steep bank just above the Russian River. I had just enough time to yell “Hey Bear” before the bear charged. I did not have time to aim, the bear was almost on top of me by the time I clicked the safety off and fired. The round hit just in front of the charging bear, the bear turned sharply to my right and ran past me within touching distance. Immediately behind this first charging bear was a second bear and it was coming right at me. I had just enough time to pump another round into the chamber and fire ... this round going just behind the second charging bear. Luckily for me, the second bear turned and followed the first bear. Barely having time to recover from this and pump another shell into the chamber, a third bear charged towards me. I took aim at the charging bear, and just as I was about to squeeze the trigger, the bear turned and followed the other bears past me. While each moment of this encounter is etched in my memory, what strikes me most is how explosively fast this all occurred.

Doing all I could to compose myself, I let dispatch know I had been charged by three bears, and was OK. Heading up the slope, I peeked around the large cottonwood tree and saw another bear, this one appearing partially buried amidst a large area of torn up vegetation. Watching carefully for any sign of life, I finally determined this larger bear was dead. Again reporting to dispatch, I then thoroughly searched the area for injured persons. I did not find anything to indicate

a mauling had occurred.

My work wasn’t done, it really was just starting. A cursory examination of the carcass revealed two small wounds, possible bullet entries, needed further examination. It was also necessary to remove the carcass from this popular fishing site. I was able to arrange for the Alaska Division of Forestry to sling load the bear out by helicopter, bringing it to a nearby gravel pit. I was able to locate two bullets in the bear carcass which were consistent with the caliber of rounds from the rifle that had been discharged two days prior.

The three bears that charged me were still in the Russian River area. They were very agitated, running along the river bank frantically bawling and snapping their jaws at the air. Their size indicated they were 2½ year old cubs. We cleared the area of all people and closed the area to anglers temporarily.

On August 4, we interviewed the two men the FWO had contacted along the Russian River on July 31. Their stories had changed, saying now that they had found the bears fishing in a small pool and had only shot after the bears charged them. When questioned further, they admitted that after approaching the fishing hole, they had watched the bears for about a minute before firing a shot at the feet of the bear in the middle of the group. After the first shot the bears started “acting weird” and looked like they were going to come toward them, so they shot three more rounds.

At this point, the rifle was seized and taken to the State forensic lab in Anchorage. The State ballistic examiner matched one of the bullets taken from the bear to this seized rifle. The other bullet was damaged, as though it had ricocheted off the ground prior to entering the bear, and he was not able to match it because of the damage. This second bullet was the same caliber and make as the one that matched.

Ultimately, the shooter was fined, lost his firearm and spent 10 days in jail. According to court documents, he admitted to agents that he “probably hit the sow” and “thought he made a poor choice and had shot too soon.”

The two-year old bears stayed around the Kenai/Russian River area the rest of that summer and fall and returned the next summer as three-year olds. One of the bears had an injured front paw, and would routinely pick up fish carcasses on the island just above the ferry and float down the river on his back eating the carcasses. He would do this repeatedly most days.

This, unfortunately, is the story that comes to mind

upon hearing reports of the bear cubs at the Kenai-Russian River confluence this year. It is unfortunate in that as yearling cubs, these bears already have a low chance of survival if they are in fact on their own. It is unfortunate because they may already be exhibiting behaviors that don't bode well. The three bears I encountered in 2005 became habituated to humans, losing their fear of people. Worse, they ultimately became conditioned to obtaining human food. They slowly became more aggressive, and began bluff charging people to get them away from their backpacks or fish stringers. All three of those bears were eventually killed in defense of life or property.

I relate this story to remind visitors to know and follow established regulations, and maintain situa-

tional awareness at all times. While at the Kenai-Russian River confluence area, you must keep all backpacks and coolers within 3 feet and all stringers of fish must be within 12 feet. You are also asked to remove your fish whole and clean them responsibly elsewhere, or cut fish carcasses up into small pieces and throw them into deeper, faster moving waters. We all have a role to play in staying safe and reducing potential for conflicts with bears and other wildlife.

Chris Johnson has been a law enforcement officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for 30 years and currently serves as Senior Federal Wildlife Officer. Find more Refuge Notebook articles (1999–present) at https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Kenai/community/refuge_notebook.html.