

On the Path

Slow Down, You Move Too Fast!

By Keith Hammer

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Some years ago I was bluff-charged by a sow black bear while riding my mountain bike. Luckily, I wasn't going full-tilt or her bluff would have likely turned into a tackle!

I was descending Krause Basin on an old, partially overgrown logging road when I came around a blind corner to find a sow and her cubs crossing the road. I locked up my rear wheel and she took a couple lunges toward me. Both of us stopped before we tangled with one another and she immediately returned to her two cubs, which had climbed up separate trees on opposite sides of the road. Checkmate!

I'd just hiked cross-country to the top of Strawberry Mountain and had neither the energy nor desire to turn around and peddle back uphill to Peters Ridge Road and take the long way home. Bear spray already in hand, I backed up the road a ways and sat it out while the sow talked her cubs down out of their trees and got them both headed in the same direction away from the road.

I was reminded of this experience last weekend while hiking the Echo-Broken Leg Trail from Jewel Basin Road into Wolf Creek. The trail has a gentle grade and smooth tread, so it receives use by mountain bikers as well. What I saw, however, was evidence of the type of behavior that doesn't endear mountain bikers to hikers and folks on horseback.

In a number of places, bikes are veering off-trail to jump off humps and stumps before rejoining the main trail again. The result is unsightly braiding of the trail, the trampling of native vegetation, and grim reminders of the times horses have been spooked or hikers have been surprised if not nearly run over by mountain bikers speeding down trails. Slower speeds and a better stay-on-trail ethic would serve not only to improve relations with hikers and horse folk, it may very well help prevent accidental run-ins with bears and other wildlife.

A man running on a trail in Glacier Park recently was surprised and bitten by a grizzly bear. He was lucky the bear lost interest in him after a couple of chomps and left him well enough alone to drive himself to the hospital for repairs that included surgery. The incident prompted Glacier to issue a press release reminding folks that it's simply not smart and not safe to run on backcountry trails, citing an "increasing number of injuries and fatalities nationwide due to runners surprising bears at close range."

The same advice and caution should apply to mountain biking and hiking mindlessly, even if slowly. A friend walking her dogs in the foothills of the Swan Range a few weeks ago had a relatively safe look at a grizzly bear solely because she was alert enough to hear it moving through the brush even before her dogs did. And she had the wherewithal to keep her dogs at her side and bear spray on her hip in the event of a more surprise encounter.

Indeed, we should not always assume that wildlife become aware of our approach before we do of them. Their sight, like ours, is limited by curves in the trail or a rise in

the terrain. The sound of a rushing stream nearby can mask the sounds of our approach and a breeze can keep our scent from reaching them. Glacier Park's web site includes some excellent advice in these regards at <http://www.nps.gov/glac/planyourvisit/bears.htm>.

A special awareness and heightening of our senses should occur whenever we are in the outdoors. We will get much more out of our experience if we are paying keen attention to our surroundings and we'll be safer and less likely to have an unpleasant encounter with wildlife at close range. It's definitely not the time to have our ears plugged with our iPod!

Had I been biking faster that day in Krause Basin I have no doubts I would have skidded right into that black bear as it lunged towards me - and that she would have kicked my butt or worse in defense of her cubs. Instead, I was able to stop and she was able to turn her advances into nothing more than a clear warning I was to come no closer. It was a close enough call and a valuable lesson learned.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Mountain bike jumps along the Echo-Broken Leg Trail. Keith Hammer photo.