

# History of grizzly makes re-introduction to Arizona unlikely

by Bert Edises

"The wounded male grizzly, 700 pounds of insane fury, frothing from his mouth, charged at the hunter, who tried frantically to get another ball into the chamber of his single-shot, top loading rifle. As was so often true before the day of the repeating rifle, the bear won the race and tore his assailant to pieces. Fortunately, grizzlies cannot climb trees, so the hunter's companion, his shot having gone wide, remained in the comparative safety of a nearby spruce tree until rescued."

This early account of the death of a grizzly hunter could be repeated many times from tales of the pre-Civil War period. With the single-shot rifles then in use, only one shot could be counted on in a fight with the grizzly, a ball which penetrated the skull and went directly into the brain. No other shot could kill the animal instantly.

Many eyewitnesses attest to seeing grizzlies absorb a dozen or more slugs into less vital parts of the body, only to turn and kill one or more of their tormenters before expiring. What are the characteristics of

this immensely powerful creature, whose scientific name is *Ursus horribilis*, and what has it got to do with the state of Arizona?

Let's take the second question first. Before the turn of the century the grizzly roamed throughout Arizona and New Mexico, chiefly in the higher mountains. In Arizona he was most numerous in the east-central part of the state, especially in the White Mountains, but was found as far west as Oak Creek Canyon. The grizzly, in short, was a native Arizonan.

As for his characteristics, first of all, next to the Kodiak bear, he is the undisputed giant among bears (I speak of him in the present tense, because although he has been wiped out in Arizona, New Mexico and other southwestern states, the southwest grizzly still survives in some of the mountainous parts of Mexico.)

Adult grizzlies measure as much as 6.5 feet from nose to tail. Standing on his hind legs he can exceed 8 feet in height. An adult male can weigh 700 pounds; adult females range from 300 to 350 pounds.

The grizzly's strength is legendary. It was once believed that he

killed cattle by breaking their necks with a chop of his forepaw, but in fact it was his powerful jaws that did the job, clamping down on the animal's spine with such force that the backbone was severed.



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Despite his huge size and awkward gait, the grizzly can run amazingly fast. Cavalry troops stationed in Arizona found the bear could keep up with a running horse on level ground and easily outdistance one on rough ground.

Interestingly enough this huge, fierce animal prefers solitude and strongly resents having his living space disturbed, whether by other animals or by human beings. It is dangerous to surprise him where he lives, or during his hibernation period, or to come suddenly upon a female with cubs.

Let me offer a few hints as to what to do in the unlikely event you are confronted with an

animal that may or may not be a grizzly. First, climb a tree. If the animal climbs up after you, he's not a grizzly, because grizzlies cannot climb trees. If he stays on the ground, look to see whether

he has a distended face, a prominent shoulder hump, and very long, only slightly curved claws on the forepaws. (These claws prevent adult grizzlies from climbing trees.) If the answer to the three questions is affirmative — stay in the tree until help arrives.

What are the grizzly's eating habits? He is an omnivore. He eats anything including carrion, of which he is inordinately fond. Under natural conditions, i.e., before Arizona was transformed into a cattle and sheep raising territory and his mountain home was invaded, 90 percent of his diet was herbaceous vegetation. Much of the remaining 10 percent

consisted of carrion or of rodents that are grass or grassland dependent.

Everything changed with the coming of the railroad. Predictably, that event was followed by the swarming of the "nesters" into the Southwest, the extension of the Homestead Act to stock raising and the introduction of sheep into the mountain areas, with consequent denuding of the vegetation, flooding, and the washing out of the streamside plant life which was the mainstay of the grizzly's diet.

With his customary food sources wiped out, and cattle, sheep and hogs brought within easy range, the grizzly did what came naturally and developed a taste for domesticated meat. The ranchers cannot be blamed for disliking this or for sponsoring legislation offering bounties for dead grizzlies.

And it is understandable that the stockmen would demand that the federal government with its highly efficient predator and rodent control agency enter the fight against the grizzly.

The foreseeable result of all this anti-grizzly activity was that by 1900 the southwest grizzly population had been drastically

reduced and by 1950 had been virtually eliminated.

In 1922 a PARC hunter killed a grizzly in Oak Creek Canyon. It was the last grizzly known to have been taken in Arizona west of the White Mountains.

David E. Brown, to whose book *The Grizzly in the Southwest* I am indebted for much of the material in this article, tells what happened: "The cattlemen was respectful but silent as he pondered the proposal. When asked to state his reaction, the leader of the stockmen replied laconically, (unprintable epithet) and walked out of the room." Thus ended the honeymoon of the ranchers and the environmentalists.

Every nature lover will have to decide for himself the merits of the argument for the reintroduction of the grizzly. It is most unlikely, however, that the legislature will approve such a program in the near future. Picnickers in the White Mountains may therefore relax and leave their heavy artillery at home.