

□ by Lynn L. Rogers
and David Garshelis

The BWCAW Bear Attacks of 1987

On September 14 and 15, 1987, a black bear injured two campers in unprovoked, apparently predatory, attacks in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Each attack followed the same pattern. The gaunt bear entered a campsite, approached a camper, hesitated, then attacked, biting the camper on the head and neck until someone drove the bear off with canoe paddles. A day after the second attack the bear was killed, and the threat from the only attack bear in the history of the Superior National Forest ended. But the attacks and the events surrounding them will probably be remembered as long as people camp and canoe in the Minnesota wilderness. This is a detailed account of the attacks and the effort to determine why the bear had attacked and if the right bear had been killed.

Tyson Crowder, 19, an Outward Bound student from Maryville, Tennessee, was camping alone on Wabang Lake to test his survival skills. He had no food. Seven other Outward Bound students and two instructors, Mike and Ann Poe, were camped at other sites around the narrow lake. The Poes paddled by at 5 PM for a routine check on Tyson and the other students. Tyson, sitting on the shore, told them he was fine and watched them until they disappeared into a bay a quarter mile away. He then turned and saw a bear—20 feet away and angling closer, seemingly unaware of him. Tyson stood. The bear noticed him and hesitated. Tyson leaped to an offshore rock and the bear charged, finally rising to catch Tyson's head in its claws and mouth as Tyson backed off the rock into shallow water. Tyson screamed and fought, clinging to trees to resist being dragged. Students across the lake whistled to the Poes and pointed to Tyson. Within three minutes, the furiously paddling Poes were at the scene, leaping from their canoe and striking the bear with their paddles. The bear

retreated a few yards and watched as the Poes pulled Tyson into their canoe. It then swam away across the lake.

The instructors collected the other students into a single camp and built a fire to keep Tyson warm. Through the night, they all took turns tending the fire, caring for Tyson's head, neck, and shoulder wounds, and anxiously watching for the bear. At first light, Mike Poe and two of the students began carrying the canoe three-quarters of a mile through the woods to Lady Boot Bay on Lac La Croix. By 12:15 PM they had paddled, portaged, and caught a motorboat ride 10 miles to Campbell's Cabins on the Canadian side of Lac La Croix, where a float plane was available. Two hours later, Tyson was in the Ely hospital.

Meanwhile, the bear had moved 2 miles northwest to a campsite on Lady Boot Bay and, while Tyson Crowder was being flown to the hospital, attacked again. The bear appeared at 1 PM while Jeremy Cleaveland, 52, of Minnetonka, Minnesota, and his 29-year-old son James were finishing packing and getting ready to leave. Both men yelled and waved their arms at the approaching bear. It stopped 20 feet

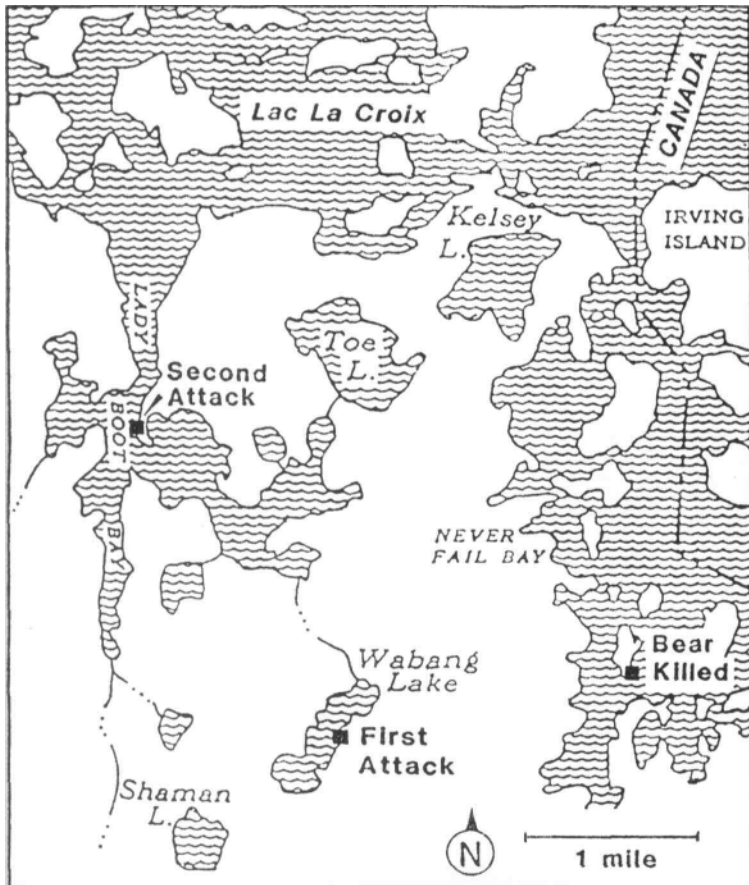
away and began pacing. James grabbed the main food pack and disappeared over the bank toward the canoe. The bear immediately started toward Jeremy but stopped again when Jeremy threw his canteen at the bear, ran for the bay, and dove in on a dead run. After swimming a few strokes, he stood and turned and found himself face to face with the bear. During the next few seconds, the bear caught him by the back of the neck and began dragging him to shore. James leaped in and the two men tried unsuccessfully to pry the bear's powerful jaws off Jeremy's neck. In the grip of the bear and with his head in and out of the water, Jeremy told James to get the canoe paddle. Three blows to the bear's head and neck made the bear drop Jeremy and retreat to shore. The men scrambled into the canoe and shoved off, abandoning the rest of their gear as the bear started toward them again. Jeremy had tooth punctures on his neck, back, and thigh, but none were bleeding excessively and the pain was tolerable. The men started out of the wilderness. With the help of campers and fishermen they met along the way, they canoed and motorboated to Campbell's Cabins. From there they were flown

- Special Note From Publishers -

The very last thing BWJ wants to do by publishing this article is further sensationalize this unfortunate incident. In fact, we feel compelled to publish it to help overcome the misunderstanding created by other more profit oriented reports. As always, our authors are the professional experts responsible for investigating the attacks. The bottom line is this. Research shows you have precisely a 1 in 10 million chance of being attacked by a black bear on a given day in the BWCAW. Still- anything can happen in the wilderness and the story has lessons we can all learn from.



Photo shows (1) first attack site, (2) second attack site, (3) bear killed site. See map for corresponding locations.



out, arriving at the Cook Hospital at 8PM.

The next day, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service joined forces to warn campers and to find and kill the rogue bear. Forest Service pilots began warning campers while administrators, wardens, and biologists from the two agencies gathered at the Ely Ranger Station. After a brief strategy meeting led by MDNR Regional Administrator John Chell, four wardens and a biologist flew to the second attack site and three wardens flew to a cabin 4 miles east southeast of there on Lac La Croix. Chuck Stock and Augie Carstens, two Forest Service technicians familiar with the rock and channels of Lac La Croix, met the wardens at the cabin with a motor boat.

By that time, the bear had moved 2½ miles east southeast and had swum 300 yards to a campsite on a small island on Lac La Croix. The party of five there, two couples from California and a friend of theirs from New Zealand, had been warned about the attacks. When the bear appeared, the five campers

scattered, running for the water and canoes as the bear chased one of them a short distance. They watched from two canoes as the bear investigated the camp, rested, tore up a garbage pack, and finally lay down to lick spilled Kool-Aid from the ground. As they watched, the float plane flew over to deliver the wardens to the cabin a mile and a half away. The campers saw it descend to land. The two women campers, both in the same canoe, immediately began paddling hard to the cabin while the men kept an eye on the bear. A few minutes later, the panting women told the wardens and pilot what had happened.

Pilot Carlo Palumbi quickly took off to circle the island in case the bear started swimming to the mainland. The three wardens and two motorboat operators sped to the island. Wardens Connie Tikkala and Lloyd Steen moved to the bow of the boat and loaded their rifles. From far out on the water, they saw the bear, lying broadside to them still licking up the Kool-Aid. The boat slowed and settled near shore. The bear raised its head briefly and resumed licking, and Connie killed it with a single, well-placed chest shot from his .300 Winchester Magnum rifle. The bear, still lying down, slumped lower and scarcely moved after the shot. Supervisory warden Art Gensmer said "Shoot it again," and Lloyd fired a .308 Winchester bullet into its chest from the rocking boat. Connie followed up with a load of 12 gauge double aught buckshot to the head, neck, and forequarters.

The group converged around the bear, a small adult female, which later tipped the scales at only 117 pounds. They dragged the carcass to the shore and began tying it to the

float of the airplane, which had landed to take the carcass into the Ely for examination. As they secured the carcass, the relaxing bear defecated, and quick thinking Connie Tikkala retrieved and bagged the feces. That turned out to be one of the most important acts in establishing the bear as the attack animal.

Bear biologists David Garshelis and Lynn Rogers met the float plane at the Forest Service dock in Ely and began the job of determining if the right bear had been shot. Although it is now known that the attack bear was the one killed, most of the early evidence indicated it was not the right bear. The bear was only half the weight estimated by the victims, and it stood maybe a foot shorter. It also was black, except on the face, rather than brown as reported by one of the victims. It seemed to have been after the campers' food rather than the campers themselves. The short chase after the running man at the kill site seemed a little unusual; but quite a few bears make short bluff charges with no intention of attacking, and witnesses commonly exaggerate when they later describe such charges. A black bear can run nearly twice as fast as a person and would have little trouble catching a person if it wanted to. The attack bear had gone into the water after people in both attacks but the dead bear had not. The bear's calm behavior during most of the hour the campers observed it seemed more like the behavior of a campwise bear than that of an attack bear, and camp nuisances almost never prey on people. Rare, predatory bears typically are bears with little or no previous contact with people. It also was a female, which, unlike grizzly

females, seldom attack people. Being a female, the bear had probably lived in the attack area its whole life, and no previous attacks had occurred. Any bruises from canoe paddles on the bear's head and neck were obscured by the buckshot injuries. The victims believed strongly that the wrong bear had been killed. There was not yet any strong evidence to connect the dead bear to the attacks so the victims began taking rabies shots, and the hunt went on.

However, over the next two days, it began to look like the dead bear was the right one. No other attacks occurred. At the second attack site, biological technician Greg Wilker found small bear tracks that matched those of the dead bear. And no sign of other bears was found anywhere in the search area. Bears were slowing down in preparation for winter, and the dead bear apparently had been the only bear still active in the area. Further, at the first attack site, investigators found hairs from both the victim and the bear caught on the bark of a tree. The bear hair was the same color and length as that on the dead bear. The most convincing evidence came from a microscopic examination of the two quarts of stomach contents by John Chell and the three biologists. It revealed 14 hairs, one of which was the same length, thickness, and approximate color as Tyson Crowder's. With that evidence, John Chell called off the hunt. The hairs were sent to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension for comparison with those of the victims, and the bear carcass was sent to the University of Minnesota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory for further tests.

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Over the next few days, more evidence emerged. First, a recovered Jeremy Cleaveland went through all his camping gear, and found that the bear had eaten a 3-inch end piece of Schwiegert's summer sausage from one of the packs. The wrapper, still showing the words, "Schwiegert's summer sausage" had been found in the dead bear's droppings. Next, James Cleaveland recalled a black tooth he saw while trying to pry the bear's jaws off his father. The dead bear had the same black tooth. Third, a forensic dentist, Ann Norrlander, compared the tooth pattern of the dead bear with the tooth marks on Jeremy Cleaveland and found an acceptable match.

The final evidence came from the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. Two of that agency's most experienced forensic scientists, Mary Ann Strauss and Donald Melander, had spent more than a week matching the hairs from the stomach with those from the heads and bodies of the two victims. Four of the hairs were similar to those of Tyson Crowder, and five were similar to those of Jeremy Cleaveland. None of the hairs matched those of any of the people at the kill site. At that point, the victims and investigators concluded that the attack bear was dead and no longer a threat.

One question remained, why did the bear attack? At first we thought the two quarts of plastic in the bear's stomach might have been hindering digestion, but we later learned that the bear ingested the plastic immediately before being killed and that digestive processes were normal. The veterinary laboratory report revealed nothing unusual about the bear except a very low supply of body fat. The 7-year-old bear did not have rabies, brain tumors, brain inflammation, or various viruses, although some of the tests were hindered by the buckshot injuries. What was left in the internal organs appeared normal with no bacterial infections. There were no old wounds and no old bullets lodged in the body. The bear's parasite load was not excessive. Its teeth were not decayed despite the black stain on one of them. The bear's eyes were normal. Its kidney and liver did not carry excessive amounts of lead. The

path of a black bear is not as predictable as that of a brown bear. Most hunters in the north do not think about bears, Tyson Crowder said. "I'd be the bear to problem with. I don't know if I'd kill one again." Both the probable circumstances leading to the attack and the reasons why a black bear does not efficiently explain the attacks; hundreds of bears in Minnesota were hungry and starving in 1985 but did not attack. What caused this bear to lose her judgment and attack people remains a mystery.

Chances of encountering another such bear in the near future are very slim. Nevertheless, if you are attacked, use every available weapon, including your feet and fists, to fight the bear. Do not play dead when attacked by a black bear. Black bears that attack people often hesitate at first, just as this bear did, and aggressive action by people at that time could dissuade the rare attacks. A harmless means of repelling bears that approach too closely is spraying them in the eyes with capsaicin repellent. Capsaicin, the active ingredient of hot peppers, is sold commercially as "Dog Shield" and "Halt" and is commonly used as a dog repellent by mail carriers and meter readers. It has been found to repel black bears as effectively as it does dogs. In several hundred tests, no bear appeared angered by the spray. Most immediately retreated without a sound. A few have returned shortly to retreat when sprayed again. This spray could discourage bears not only from attacking but also from becoming nuisances at campgrounds.

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