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THE SPEED OF GRIZZLY BEARS

by
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Some time ago, we received a letter from an interested person requesting information on the speed of grizzly bears (*Ursus horribilis*), and citing the fact that a local naturalist in his vicinity considered the grizzly as comparatively slow in the animal kingdom. With a background of old-timer lore on the speed and cunning of this great animal, I determined to discover if possible, the facts as they might be available for Yellowstone.

Ernest Thompson Seton, in his "Lives of Game Animals," has the following to say regarding the speed of the grizzly.

"Swift too, is he, in amazing measure for his build. Those who form their idea of a bear's speed from watching a hulking, slouching

prisoner, are sure to be amazed at the real thing. For 50 or 100 yards a Grizzly can go faster than any horse, and keep it up indefinitely. It is well known that in the spring of the year, the Indian ponies that have wintered out and are poor, very commonly become the prey of the Grizzly, who can now catch them on the open plain. Townsend tells of a wounded Grizzly that pursued closely a man on horseback for half a mile, snapping at the horse's heels, and apparently would have captured the object of his wrath but for a timely volley from the man's comrades.

"J. M. Mackenzie describes the famous Grizzly, Clubfoot, as able to keep pace with a horse going downhill, but not uphill.

"In view of this, it will be seen how absurd it is for any man to think that he may escape from a Grizzly by simply running.

"Wright says, 'The Grizzly can outrun the Black Bear by nearly half, no man can match him in speed, and it takes a pretty good horse to catch him.'"

Seton gives the summation of the views held by men during the time when the horse was the means of comparison for speed. Now let us see what we find in Yellowstone with a speedometer on a car as a check.

In April 1930, Dorr G. Yeager, former Park Naturalist, and Carl P. Russell, then Field Naturalist for the Park Service, had an excellent opportunity to "clock" the speed of grizzlies. The road to Norris had just been plowed free of snow, and these men were making the first trip of the season to the Norris Geyser Basin. Just after passing the eight mile post, a mother grizzly and two cubs were met in the road which was a narrow canyon banked by snow on either side, piled to heights of from three to five feet. Rearing on their hind legs, the grizzlies scrutinized the car, and then to the relief of the occupants, "turned and headed down the road at a rolling lope." Following at a respectful distance, the bears were trailed for approximately two miles at a speed of twenty five miles per hour, with but one pause, and that when the mother in rounding a curve lost sight of the car and reared on her hind legs to look for it, resuming her gallop at once when the car was sighted. Mr. Yeager says...."The speed mentioned in this article should not be taken as a criterion for the speed of a grizzly. At no time (naturally enough) did we push them to a maximum." (This summary of Mr. Yeager's article is taken from YELLOWSTONE NATURE NOTES, Vol. VII, No. 5 for May, 1930).

Another very dramatic incident was recorded by Ranger Cliff Anderson (now of Yosemite National Park). Mr. Anderson and his family were driving toward the Cooke entrance of the park and were beyond the Buffalo Ranch. In rounding a curve near the Devils Well, a female grizzly and her two cubs were seen feeding on a carcass near the road. There were two cars preceding the Anderson car and the road was muddy with considerable slush snow in it. As the cars approached the mother grizzly charged and jumped down into the cut made by the snowplow in recently clearing the road, but for some reason, just before the cars reached her, she sprang back up on the snow bank at the side of the road. While she was in the cut, her cubs disappeared over the hill into Soda Butte Creek. When the mother regained the bank and failed to see her cubs, she immediately gave chase to the cars which were then about fifty yards ahead of her. A brother of Mr. Anderson, who was riding in the rumble seat of the six cylinder Oldsmobile, became alarmed and warned the Ranger by rapping on the rear window. Vigorously blowing the horn, the Ranger tried to get the cars ahead to speed up all that they could, but due to the condition of the road, much speed was impossible. The grizzly quickly overtook the cars, and then jumping up on the snow bank, lunged out and down at the car. Several attempts were made in this manner to catch the car, but the grizzly missed each try as she lost time in jumping up on the snow before leaping for the car. Needless to say, the Ranger's brother had crawled down into the back of the car and had closed rumble cover! They were chased from the Devils Well to Hoppe's Prairie, a distance of approximately two miles, and the maximum speed (remembering road conditions) was 28 miles per hour. The bear had just come out of hibernation, which must also be considered.

District Ranger "Ben" Arnold has reported further evidence on this question of speed of grizzlies.

While the Arnolds were driving from Mammoth to Tower Falls one night early last summer, four grizzlies, a mother and three

yearling cubs, were seen in the road ahead of the car at a distance of about two hundred yards. The bears immediately turned and ran down the road for a full half mile before dashing up the hill into the timber and out of sight. For the last quarter mile, they



averaged 30 miles per hour and were not crowded at all. The bears were running on the oiled road, and did not have the advantage they would have had on a dirt surface.

We have had reports of grizzlies making 35 miles per hour when running before a car, but as I have been unable to verify any of them with a written statement, they shall be omitted.

Knowing the nature and disposition of the grizzly, no sane person is going to pursue and crowd one in a car, for fear that the animal might turn and demolish the car and perhaps, the occupants, too. From the foregoing incidents as cited, it is seen that speeds have actually been recorded for the grizzly up to and including thirty miles per hour with the bear setting his own pace. What they might be able to do under "pressure" or in anger is entirely a matter for supposition.

From observing grizzlies and having seen them, starting from a standstill, hurl themselves with tremendous speed upon an approaching rival, there is little room in my mind for the thought that they are "slow moving creatures." Grizzlies are powerful beasts, and as evidenced by the aforementioned reports, have considerable endurance, for covering two miles at from 25 to 28 miles per hour proves a stamina that would certainly try the best of horses.

Perhaps, after the roads are plowed open this spring, some obliging grizzly may run a faster heat, or some fool-hardy individual may crowd one to nearer the maximum, whatever that may be, but until such time, the best speed for grizzlies in Yellowstone, which I have been able to find, is thirty miles per hour.

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