

Bears Found to be Significant Predators of Neonatal Ungulates Across North America

The advent of expandable, motion-sensitive radio-collar packages in the late 1970s and early 1980s resulted in discovery that both grizzly and black bears killed more neonatal ungulates than previously had been suspected. In 3 areas in Alaska and the Yukon, grizzlies killed 41%, 76%, and 84% of all marked moose calves, while black bears killed 57% in a fourth study. These areas are considered to have high predation levels. Wolves were present in all these areas, but in each case, bears killed more young calves than did wolves. In one of these areas near Tok, Alaska, grizzlies also chased down and killed more adult moose than did wolves.

The senior author worked in Denali NP in 1984 and 1985, when grizzlies also killed more neonatal calves than did wolves. (Wolves have since increased nearly 2-fold and they now kill more calves than do grizzlies according to Dave Mech and Lane Adams). Predators in Denali killed caribou calves at the more moderate rate of 46% (of 96 marked caribou calves) in 1984 and 1985, similar to

Yellowstone's moderate rate of 32%. In more temperate northern Idaho, predators—mostly black bears—killed 65% of all marked elk calves.

French and French documented 3 major hunting strategies for grizzlies:

(1) The search, where the bear hunted sagebrush patches in a zig-zag fashion with nose to the ground. Elk calves were caught in this fashion even when no adult cows were present to suggest calves were in the area.

(2) The chase, when grizzlies charged groups of cows and calves and sought to separate and run down an individual calf. Grizzlies rarely caught straight-running calves, but cutting off the angle on calves running in an arc often proved successful.

(3) The ambush, when grizzlies charged out from the treeline at groups of elk in open sagebrush or meadows. Gunther and Renkin, grizzly bear researchers in the park, observed a high level of motivation by grizzlies to hunt calves; grizzlies chased elk in 26% of all May sightings and grizzlies chased elk for an average of 8.7 minutes. Forty-five percent of 130 chases observed by Gunter and Renkin and the Frenches resulted in capture of at least one elk calf.