

Unbearable: Garbage containers receive grizzly punishment at West Yellowstone Discovery Center

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By SHERRY DEVLIN of the Missoulian

WEST YELLOWSTONE - Sam was 7 months old when he raided his first campground, so there's no hesitation when he comes across a trash bin.

Straight away, the now 8-year-old grizzly bear plants his front paws against the container and puts muscle to metal.

The 400-pound garbage bin tumbles over.

Sam inspects the newly exposed surface, finds nothing of interest and again topples the bin. Then again. And again.

Uphill. Downhill. End over end. Until the "bear-resistant" lid pops open, rewarding Sam with a buffet of rotting chicken, elk, tuna, sardines, dried mangoes and apricot jam.

The 920-pound bear is satisfied, and soon returns for seconds.

The trash bin vendor is less pleased, but insists he will be back as well - with a modified, bear-worthy model.

"Grizzly bears are extremely good problem solvers," says Patti Sowka, executive director of the Living with Wildlife Foundation. "And very quick learners."

"People never believe me when I say bears are capable of abstract thought," adds Derek Reich, a Living with Wildlife board member and maker of UnBearAble Bins. "But just watch these guys. They'll put one and two together and get three."

The aircraft industry has its test pilots, the food industry its test kitchens. So why shouldn't the creators of bear-resistant garbage bins put their products to the ultimate test?

"We have all these containers on the market, but we don't know how well they perform until we actually start using them," Sowka said. "And if they don't work, it's a bad experience for everybody."

"Money is wasted on containers that aren't effective, and bears end up dead."

So Sowka and a dozen wildlife managers and trash bin vendors gathered last week at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone to conduct the first large-scale test of bear-resistant garbage containers.

Their test pilots: the Discovery Center's eight captive grizzly bears.

One by one, the vendors handed over their creations to the bears. One by one, the grizzlies did their best to bite, claw and squash the garbage bins.

Kobuk, a 6-year-old bear born and orphaned near Delta Junction, Alaska, trundled over to a campground-model trash bin and immediately opened the pull-down door with his right claws.

But the opening was too little for Kobuk's big bear head, so he started pushing at the metal topper - realizing right away that it was bolted to a post.

The investigation continued until Kobuk pushed against the bottom of the trash can, which was made of heavy plastic.

The container gave way ever so slightly, revealing its one weakness. And Kobuk went to work.

For the next 30 minutes, the bear bit, pushed, pulled and pounded on the polyethylene trash can, intent on prying it loose from the metal topper.

He knew a treat awaited him at the bottom of the can. The smelly bait is the reward that provokes the grizzlies into action.

When Kobuk finally folded the plastic can in half, he found it awash in foods the Discovery Center bears don't normally receive: applesauce, marmalade, pork, out-of-date beef and salmon.

It was the second "defeat" of the day for Brandon Mauk, the wide-eyed proprietor of Solid Waste Systems of Parker, Colo.

Not an hour earlier, a 550-pound grizzly named Stoke had jumped up and down on Mauk's curbside rollout bin until the hinges popped off the lid.

"Wow. I guess that'll be our black bear kit," Mauk quipped as he snapped photographs of his flattened bin - and its www.bearproofsystems.com logo.

Stoke, born in 1995 near Revelstoke, B.C., vandalized the plastic bin for nearly 45 minutes, chasing off two other bears hoping for a turn.

"If a trash can stands up to a grizzly bear, it can stand up to anything," said Chad Bauer, operations manager for BFI Inc. in Montana. "These tests really show you their strength. They are big, powerful animals."

"But vulnerable," interjected Sowka.

Nothing kills more grizzly bears in the lower 48 states than does garbage.

Every one of those deaths could have been prevented - 31 in the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem, 51 in the Yellowstone ecosystem between 1994 and 2003.

"The ability of bears to continue to live is basically up to the responsibility of people who live in bear habitat," said Chris Servheen, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's grizzly bear recovery coordinator.

"Bears that get into human foods usually end up dying," Servheen said. "It's usually a combination of garbage, bird feed and dog food - and it usually starts with garbage."

And garbage can be kept from grizzly bears, he said.

Last week's tests did prove up several models of bear-resistant trash bins and grease traps. Several others came close, and need only minor modifications.

All of the models had already proven themselves worthy of black bears.

"Every time we test something, we learn something new," Sowka said. "Mostly about bears."

By watching the Discovery Center's grizzlies poke and pound at their new "toys," vendors and wildlife managers learn exactly how bears get into presumably secure garbage cans.

Grizzlies are strong, but also agile. They're opportunistic and persistent. They know to look for - and exploit - weakness. They remember what they've learned from past encounters with levers, cables, buttons and pulleys.

But the Discovery Center test bears couldn't open a metal trash bin manufactured by Colorado prison inmates and bolted to a cement pad.

Even 920-pound Sam couldn't get the container to budge, rattle or buckle. And as soon as he saw its permanence, the big bear lost interest and went back to pushing an unsecured bin around the enclosure.

The bears' antics kept one group of visitors at the Discovery Center all day, cheering each time a grizzly got the best of a trash bin.

"Come on Sam, you can do it," said Ken Gurian, a Bergen County, N.J., man on spring break with his family.

They didn't see any bears in Yellowstone Park, "but we did come across some pawprints in the snow and there were a lot of bison," Gurian said.

"I'm glad we came here last," said Jackie Colton, whose family joined the Gurians for the trip west. "If I'd seen a grizzly bear first, Yellowstone would've been a lot scarier."

Back home, she said, the biggest pests are raccoons and skunks.

"I just never knew how beautiful or how smart bears could be," Colton said. "Or how tenacious they are - how they'll just work and work until they find the one little flaw that gets them into the garbage."

"Hey look at that," she said, as 340-pound Spirit put her head all the way inside a breached bin. "That looks like me finishing off an ice cream sundae."

A co-worker once told Minette Johnson she was lucky to work in grizzly conservation because bears go to sleep for part of the year - thus limiting their ability to get into trouble.

Johnson begged to differ.

"Bears are eating machines," she said last week, while watching 600-pound Revel balance himself atop a small metal garbage bin - in his best circus-bear imitation.

"When they are coming out of hibernation or going into hibernation, they have a one-track mind," said Johnson, northern Rockies field representative for Defenders of Wildlife. "They are completely focused on finding food."

And that single-mindedness gets grizzly bears in trouble.

"Even though bears are out and about for a shorter period of time than some predators, like wolves, they get into trouble with just about everything you can imagine," Johnson said. "They'll lick barbecue grills. They'll eat dog food. And, of course, they'll get into garbage."

Complaints of grizzlies raiding garbage containers increase every year in the intermountain West, and have exploded over the past five years.

"Not only grizzly bear, but also black bear, populations are improving all across the West," said Mack Long, regional supervisor for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Missoula and chairman of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee's Northern Continental Divide subcommittee.

"The goal is not to have a grizzly bear behind every tree," Long said, "but we do want viable populations of bears and we want those bears to be able to move across the landscape."

At the same time, the human population "is doing really well," he said. "We have people expanding into areas where they've never been before, and we have bears occupying habitat that's been without bears.

"And none of that's going to stop."

So it behooves western Montanans - and all Westerners, really - to secure their food and feed and garbage in bear-resistant places, he said. Not in rickety sheds. Not on the back porch or beneath a flimsy camper shell.

"That's what these bear-resistant products do," Long said. "They give people an opportunity to live in bear habitat in a responsible manner."

"The more each individual homeowner can do, the less likely they are to create a situation where a good bear comes in, gets into trouble and has to be put down because it's now a food-habituated bear," he said. "Most of the time when there's an interaction between people and bears, the bear loses.

"So we don't want that interaction to occur. We just don't want people and bears to have conflict, and these products are a big step in that direction."

Already, some communities are at work on "bear-smart" campaigns. BFI has provided 600 bear-resistant collection bins throughout the state (at \$1,200 to \$2,000 each). And West Yellowstone requires bear-resistant containers of all businesses.

Sowka's Swan Valley-based Living with Wildlife Foundation publishes a guide to every bear-resistant product on the market, and will now add information on their effectiveness. She leads workshops on bear-smart living and answers lots of questions - including one recent inquiry from Africa about cheetah-resistant garbage bins.

Probably 85 percent of the people - newcomers and old-timers alike - who live in bear country are good neighbors to humans and bears, said Brian Debolt, a bear management officer for Wyoming Game and Fish in Lander.

"Then you've got that other 10 or 15 percent of the people who, frankly, are slobs," Debolt said. "They just don't care. And bears die because of it."

Spirit keys into the garbage bin the moment she pokes her broad snout into the early afternoon sun. She can smell the people food, then sees the familiar plastic rollout bin.

It's been nearly two years since Spirit was routinely raiding garbage cans at golf courses in and around Whitefish, but she remembers the trouble those encounters brought - barking dogs, the crack of the bear biologist's pellet gun, baited traps and tranquilizer darts.

So the grizzly approaches the trash cart with caution and stops to hang onto a snag a few feet away.

Then, one paw still grabbing the tree, Spirit pushes the garbage bin to the ground. And runs.

No dogs. No shouts or gunshots. No pepper spray.

But the grizzly sow is nervous, and now agitated. She picks up a boulder between her paws and throws it aside. She grabs a log stacked in a nearby pile. It, too, goes flying.

Now she's digging up great globs of dirt and pawing at the log pile.

"That's diverted aggression," Long explains. "She remembers the aversive conditioning. She's burning off energy."

Finally, temptation overtakes caution and Spirit pounces on the plastic bin. Frantically, as if she's doing CPR, the bear pounds on the container.

The more the plastic buckles, the bolder Spirit becomes.

When another grizzly, the much larger Revel, tries to push her off the plaything, Spirit chases him away - roaring and baring her teeth.

"If bears can walk up to a trash can and eat 20 pounds of garbage, they'll do that," Long says. "But if they don't get a reward, they'll go back to natural foods and stay away from people."

Nothing is 100 percent, absolutely guaranteed bear-proof, Sowka said. Leave a garbage can with grizzly bears long enough and they'll find a way to open it.

"But we can make these products bear-resistant, and that's all they need to be," she said. "We just need to discourage the bears. We just need to keep them moving - onto someplace where nature provides the meals."

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