

When grizzlies and humans collide

When bears get hungry and go looking for food they often run into trouble with humans. And this year there are a lot of hungry bears around Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone Park's grizzlies are going to be particularly hungry this northern hemisphere autumn, and that means more dangerous meetings with humans in a year that is already the United States park's deadliest on record. Scientists report that a favourite food of many bears, nuts from whitebark pine cones, is scarce. So as grizzlies look to put on some weight in preparation for the long winter ahead, scientists say, they will be looking for another source of protein – meat – and running into trouble along the way.

Wildlife managers already report bears coming down off the mountains and into areas frequented by hunters, berry pickers and hikers.

"Pack your bear spray: there's going to be run-ins," said grizzly researcher Chuck Schwartz with the US Geological Survey.

Two people have been fatally mauled by grizzlies so far this year in Wyoming and Montana. Experts said that's the most

in one year in at least a century for the Yellowstone region, which also includes parts of Idaho.

The bears in both instances were later killed.

Full-grown Yellowstone bears can stand 1.83m tall and top 270kg. They have been known to peel off a man's face with a single swipe of their massive, clawed paws.

In the latest attack, a Michigan man was killed and two others injured when an undernourished bear and her three cubs marauded through a crowded camping ground near Cooke City, Montana, on July 28. A month earlier, a botanist from Cody, Wyoming, was killed by a bear shortly after the animal woke up from being tranquillised by researchers.

And it's not just humans at risk.

Yellowstone's grizzlies were recently ordered back on to the threatened species list by a federal judge who cited in part a decline in whitebark pine.

Beetles, apparently surviving winters in larger numbers due to less frequently freezing temperatures, have wrecked vast stands of the high-altitude trees. In some areas studied by researchers, more than 70 per cent of trees have been killed.

While bears aren't starving, the loss of whitebark is driving increasing numbers of conflicts with humans.

"Every year is now a bad year for whitebark pine," said Louisa Wilcox with the Natural Resources Defence Council.

"We can expect more conflicts and we are getting it."

Government scientists said the two fatal maulings came too early

in the year for whitebark pine to have played a role. Bears typically don't start gorging themselves on the troves of pine nuts that are stashed by squirrels until

mid-August.

But the attacks highlighted the hazards of a region that is home to an estimated 580 grizzlies and visited by more than 3 million people a year. And officials said the maulings should serve as a warning as bears begin to push to lower elevations. Adult males will need to gain on average 22kg in the next few months to last through the winter.

"Right now every god-dang dead cow down in this country's got grizzlies on them," said Mark Brusino, a bear specialist with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department in Cody.

"We've already had a couple of reports of bears on the gut piles of hunter-killed elk. Road-killed deer have bears on them."



Under stress: These two grizzly bear cubs face an uncertain future as food supplies run low in and around Yellowstone National Park.

Photo: REUTERS

Hazardous encounters with humans are considered most likely outside Yellowstone National Park, in occupied areas along the fringes of the bears' 36,260-square kilometre wilderness habitat.

Hunters – their high-powered rifles notwithstanding – are particularly exposed because they do exactly what the experts

say not to: They sneak around in the underbrush at dawn and dusk, often alone and making elk calls to lure in big game – and the occasional hungry bear.

At Stillwater Outfitters near Cooke City, just up the road from

the camping ground maulings, owner Mary Robison said her clients were "definitely a lot more

sketchy now" about running into bears.

Robison, a backcountry runner and hiker, said she had a too-casual attitude about grizzlies in the past.

"Now when I'm running, every two minutes I'm yelling something or I'm singing" to warn bears of her approach, she said.

While fatal encounters remain rare for humans, it is not so uncommon for bears to die after they

run into people.

Twenty-two grizzlies are known to have died or been removed this year in and around Yellowstone National Park. Most were killed or relocated by wildlife officials because they had attacked people, acted aggressively or destroyed livestock or property.

The record number of bear deaths, 79, came in 2008 – another poor year for whitebark pine.

AAP



KIRK'S DAISY



What: Kirk's daisy

Scientific name: *Brachyglottis kirkii*

Threat status: Declining

Kirk's daisy is still found on the Coromandel Range and northern Kaimai-Mamaku Range, the west coast and King Country, Pirongia and Pureora Forest.

Kirk's daisy is an epiphyte which grows in lowland to lower montane (mountain) forest although it sometimes grows on the forest floor. An epiphyte is a plant that grows on another but does extract sustenance from the host on which it sits which is the case with parasitic plants.

It is a spring-flowering plant and grows to 1.5m tall with purple stems and grey bark developed on old wood. The leaves are variable in shape, usually toothed in the upper third, hairless, with the upper surface of the leaf being pale to dark green and often tinged maroon. Flowers are 30 by 40mm in diameter and borne in dense flower heads of 3 to 20 flowers. The individual daisy-like flowers have white petals. The fruits are dry, windborne and can be likened to dandelion seed fruit structures. Flowering occurs during August to October and fruiting from October to December.

It is a very attractive species, however because it is usually epiphytic, it is often well out of reach and rarely at eye level. It can be confused with the two pittosporum epiphytes. These pittosporums however do not have daisy-like flowers.

This plant is browsed by possums, goats and deer and as such it has become confined to a smaller area. It was once found in forests all over the Waikato and Coromandel areas. Watch out for it if you are tramping in the forests where it can be found.

Moirs Cursey, Waikato Biodiversity Forum co-ordinator



Funding round open

The 2010 funding round of the Waikato Community Conservation Fund is now open for applications from community groups seeking support for conservation projects. Grants of up to \$5000 are available from the Conservation Department, and applications close on September 20. Guidelines and an application form are on the department's website at www.doc.govt.nz/waikatocommunityconservationfund

Uni lecture series

Waikato University launches this week its Spring Lecture Series – themed on Our City, Our Region – and several speakers will discuss environmental issues. On September 7, Waikato Management School Associate Professor Stuart Locke will look at pathways to sustainable prosperity for the Waikato. The CEO of WEL Networks, Dr Julian Elder, will give the third lecture in the series on September 15, examining new global initiatives aimed at making better use of resources and improving services. Rounding off the series on September 29 is faculty of science and engineering dean Professor Bruce Clarkson and Chair of Lakes Management and Restoration Professor David Hamilton, who will look at the impact of terrestrial and aquatic initiatives on enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services. The free public lectures take place on Wednesday evenings from 6.30pm to 7.30pm at the university's academy of performing arts. Parking is available in Gate 2B off Knighton Rd, Hamilton.

Grow your own expo

Sustainable Cambridge will host a Grow Your Own garden expo on September 12. Topics during the day-long expo will include soil biology, composting, beekeeping, companion planting and an introduction to permaculture. For more information, or to register, email Sustainable Cambridge's Jenny Wilson at sustainablecambridge@clear.net.nz.

Sustainable September

Raglan's Whaingaroa Environment Centre hosts a series of events over coming weeks as part of "Sustainable September". Environmental documentaries, cheese making, beekeeping, natural fertility, introduction to fermentation, meat curing, making homebrew beer and keeping chickens and pigs are among the various talks and demonstrations arranged, and people interested in taking part should call the Whaingaroa Environment Centre on 825 0480 for more information, or to register. The events begin tomorrow.

Seabed maps online

Niwa is making highly detailed maps of the seabed around New Zealand available through its website. The 250-metre resolution digital terrain maps of New Zealand's Exclusive Economic Zone are available in multiple high-resolution file formats to suit many current and future needs. The dataset provides the most up-to-date bathymetry of the major features from one of the largest areas of deep-water seabed under our national jurisdiction. To download the maps go to: <http://www.niwa.co.nz/our-science/oceans/bathymetry> or <http://www.bathymetry.co.nz>

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