

Bear Safety for the Remote Field Worker

An interview with Frank Ritcey,
Provincial Coordinator for WildSafeBC

By **Cary Bohnet**, Kodiak Wildlife Products Inc.



It is always an insightful experience to connect with someone who has their finger on the pulse of an issue as complex and diverse as bear conflict management.

Frank Ritcey is the Provincial Coordinator at WildSafeBC with an array of responsibilities relating to educating companies and public on reducing human-wildlife conflicts. A “normal” day for Frank could range from field training showing off his bear spray quick draw to working on a high tech, real time mapping software that can display recent wildlife sightings on any computer with an internet connection.

Bear safety is a growing issue as more and more companies operate in remote areas. Traditionally full of grey areas and misconceptions, Frank’s insights hope to shed light on a few

important topics to help you stay safe in the field.

Q: Frank, thank you for taking the time to chat. Can you tell us how WildSafeBC is working with industry?

A: WildSafeBC is really here as a resource for companies. We are able to provide information relating bear and wildlife safety concerns and management that can be applied in the field. Our people are able to help with questions on how companies can work safely in areas of wildlife.

Q: What are the primary areas you see bear safety as a concern for companies operating in remote locations?

A: There are two primary areas of conflict and concern we see.

The first are encounters with remote camps where we are dealing with issues such as human habituated bears and camp attractants.

The second is where a worker is away from a camp in, the field and more exposed to bears and an encounter.

Q: CAGC members operate everywhere but for those in BC how many bears are we talking about?

A: That's a tough one to pin an exact number on but anywhere between 125 000 - 150 000 black bears in BC alone. It is important to recognize that all of BC is Black Bear country and that anytime you are out in the field there is a chance of encountering bears.

Q: What scenarios are the most likely to cause dangerous conflicts?

A: There are a couple things. There is a chance that you could be dealing with a human-habituated and food-conditioned bear. Even if your company has excellent practices, a previous company may not have been properly managing their attractants. Now you have a situation where a bear considers your camp as a food source even though you are doing all the right things.

In general whenever you are in the field surprising a bear is a concern. Such as a situation with a sow with cubs, a bear feeding or even just a startled bear may cause a defensive attack.

The predatory bear encounter is the one that most people fear. This is where a bear is actively stalking you because it views you as prey. Statistically this is the least common and doesn't happen often.

Q: For the remote worker operating in bear country, what training do you suggest they have?

A: Anyone who goes out into bear country should have some level of bear safety training. WildSafeBC and other organizations have online and in person bear safety training. The unfortunate thing is there is no universally recognized standard or certification. At a minimum, all field staff should watch the Staying Safe in Bear Country DVD. It's the best 25 minutes you could spend before going into the field.

Q: There are a range of products out there. What products do you suggest should be carried to protect someone in the field?

A: Any person that is in bear country should carry bear spray and have it readily available. Bear spray has been proven effective time and time again as most effective at deterring a bear attack. If every field worker was carrying bear spray and had proper training a couple things would happen. First, there would be less conflict and danger to people and, second, there would be less incidents where a bear has to be destroyed.

When you are dealing with a threatened species (like grizzly bears), non-lethal deterrents (such as bear spray and electric

fencing) are preferred because they prevent a bear from being destroyed and are far more effective than the lethal protection afforded by firearms.

Q: What about BearBangers, Airhorns, Rubber Slugs, ect?

A: BearBangers and air horns have their place in camp settings, especially during first encounters to scare a bear away. However, over time, a bear can be conditioned to these and they can be less effective. The number one product you want to carry is bear spray.

Q: How important is it to practice with the deterrent products?

A: It is very important that people practice with whatever deterrent they use. For bear spray specifically, knowing how the product works is so important. Users should be familiar with everything from how to release the safety mechanism, seeing the range that the spray shoots, and how wind affects the spray pattern. The more you practice with it, the more confident you become with it.

One of the things that is also important to practice is how quickly you can get the bear spray canister out and ready. Many attacks happen in a matter of seconds so you need to be able to consistently draw and deploy the bear spray quickly.

We use inert bear spray in our training to allow people to practice without having the risk of someone accidentally getting sprayed. Inert spray is much safer and well worth the investment when practicing. People always feel better and more confident after having actually used the product. Refresher courses in bear spray deployment should be done yearly and the expiry dates can be checked at this time as well.

Q: Electric Fencing. We see this in the camps, does it have a place in the field?

A: Absolutely. More and more people are using portable electric fencing units. Many of the portable electric fences can be easily taken into remote areas, set up quickly and use 4 D cell batteries. These are great for protecting your worksite when you are away or if you are staying overnight on a site. Food should be stored away from your sleeping area in a bear-proof container and suspended so as to be inaccessible to the bear. In treeless areas, a second fence can also be used to protect your food cache.

Q: When does "Bear Season" really start and when should companies start to prepare?

A: Well it really depends on the area and varies greatly. We have some coastal areas that have bear encounters year round. In the interior, I would say to be on the safe side, be prepared in April.

In terms of packing bear spray, I would say have it year round. Something we understand at WildSafeBC is there are animals other than bears out there. The cougar is a perfect example of a winter-time hunter that is out there. We actually just had an incident with a field worker and a pack of wolves.



people who view the bear as a wild, killing machine that is going to eat you the second you get outside of your vehicle. Which is wrong... and makes it hard to concentrate on your field work.

On the other side there are the people who have the attitude, “oh it’s just a bear” and they dismiss it and don’t understand the power that even a small black bear has.

So you get misconceptions and the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. Some days the bear is innocuous and some days the bear can be very dangerous. It’s just not a good idea to go into the field with preconceptions either way.

There are also a few myths that we hear sometimes that are totally wrong. Like people keeping bears out of camps with bleach and bears can’t run fast down hills.

Q: An issue in seismic specifically is identifying bear dens. Can you give direction on bear den indentation?

A: That’s really a tough one. It depends on the season and the most difficult time is in the winter. Generally the bears enter the den right before it snows. Once the snow is over the den, it becomes really hard to identify where they are without the use of dogs.

Through the snow you might be able to see a breathing hole where there is frost around a small opening. If there is no snow, you can look for more obvious signs like fresh digging, areas around the base of upturned trees, brush piles... really any place to get them out of the elements. Ideally dens are identified and marked in the fall before the winter.

Q: What are the most common bear-related misconceptions you see?

A: It’s funny - you get misconceptions on either side. You get

Q: Tell us about your new online program WARP. How can this help companies?

A: WARP is a new online tool on the WildSafeBC website that maps data regarding wildlife encounters and allows users to interact with the data. The software has many features that could be useful to companies. Features like having the ability to look at reported wildlife conflicts in the areas where your company is operating or the ability to receive automatic alerts of when there is a bear sighting in a specific area.

As more people and companies use the program to both receive and to report wildlife conflicts, the more powerful the program will become.

*Frank Ritcey is the Provincial Coordinator for WildSafeBC. For more information on WildSafeBC programs and how they can help your company visit: www.wildsafebc.com. Cary Bohnet is the Vice President of Kodiak Wildlife Products offering wildlife safety products and services to companies operating in remote locations: www.kodiakcanada.com **S***

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