



Kenai Peninsula Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*)

Status

Alaska population of special concern

Description

Brown bears can be found throughout the Kenai Peninsula, except in the coastal portions of Game Management Unit 7 in Kenai Fjords National Park. Densities of bears are considered highest in the lowland forests and intermountain valleys where anadromous streams provide salmon for feeding. The Kenai Peninsula is located in south central Alaska adjacent to Cook Inlet and the Gulf of Alaska

Habitats and Habits

Brown bears spend most of their waking hours eating or in search of food. Brown bears emerge from their dens in early to mid-April and begin feeding on emergent vegetation and, to some extent, winter carrion. In areas with moose and caribou, brown bears search out and prey on newborn calves from mid-May to mid-July. This time also coincides with the bears' breeding season.



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Photo

By July, some streams and rivers contain salmon. Bears spend much of the summer and fall concentrated along salmon streams until spawned out carcasses are no longer available. By September and into early fall, bears finish fattening up on berries and begin entering their dens in early October.

Causes of Decline

The long-term health of brown bears on the Kenai Peninsula depends upon maintaining quality bear habitat. While some land is protected in federally designated wilderness areas, considerable habitat is threatened by human encroachment. The Kenai Peninsula is one of the fastest growing regions in the state. Commercial, recreational and residential developments in communities throughout the peninsula will continue to reduce the quantity and quality of bear habitat into the next century. The infrastructure (gaslines, powerlines and roads) to service these communities will continue to fragment bear habitat and further threaten the viability of brown bears.

Recent increases in the number of nuisance bear complaints, bear human encounters, and Defense of Life or Property (DLP) kills have raised concerns with bear managers on the Kenai. While harvests are closely monitored and regulations modified to protect bears when needed, wildlife managers have virtually no control over DLP's, which occur when people and bears come in contact with each other. We must take steps to minimize these negative interactions before others are injured or killed or bears needlessly shot. All activities that encroach on bear habitat should be scrutinized and carefully planned in order to minimize the impacts to bears.

Currently, timber harvest practices designed to salvage dead and dying trees from the spruce bark beetle epidemic could produce large scale effects on the quality of brown bear habitat. Logging mature forests may affect brown bears in many ways, including fragmentation of forested habitat and increased access to the public through an extensive road system.

Research and Recovery

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has been working with the US Forest Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service on brown bear habitat concerns. In 1984, the Interagency Brown Bear Study Team (IBBST) was officially formed to collaborate on projects and direct needed research activities. Much of what we know about Kenai brown bear ecology was initiated through this group.

Management of Kenai Peninsula brown bears is based on sustained yield principles. Because brown bears are long lived and have a low reproductive potential, we manage them very conservatively. Currently, a short fall season by permit allows hunters to take the small harvestable surplus, and hunters are encouraged to take male bears. [See *Kenai Peninsula brown bear [management report](#) (PDF file).*]

The Department of Fish and Game initiated a strategic planning process in June of 1999. The process involved stakeholders from various groups and agencies and produced a **[management plan](#)** to ensure the conservation of brown bears into the next century.

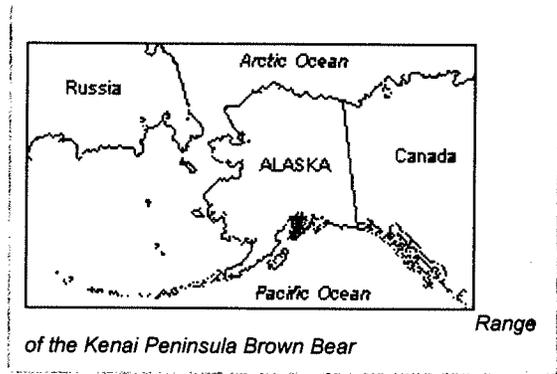
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Giant brown bear charges hunters 650- to 725-pound bruin shot only 20 yards away

By **JOSEPH ROBERTIA**
and **JENNY NEYMAN**



Charles Goff and Matt Zeek, two hunters from Soldotna, prepared to skin a brown bear they killed Saturday when the animal charged them while they checked a remote black bear-baiting station off of Mackey Lake Road. In the background, Jeff Selinger, Soldotna area management biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, surveys the "day bed" the bear was resting in prior to charging the men.

Photos by Joseph Robertia

"We were just going out to see if a bear had visited the site. We were on the trail and didn't see a bear on the bait, so we started heading in," Zeek said.

Matt Zeek and Charles Goff made cautious progress down the trail — their eyes scanning the trees and underbrush, ears tuned to detect every rustle, and shotguns loaded and ready — hoping to see a bear.

Their preparedness saved their lives, yet they were not prepared for what they encountered.

The Soldotna hunters were heading to their remote black bear-baiting station late Saturday morning in a heavily wooded area a few miles north of Rainbow Drive, off of Mackey Lake Road outside of Soldotna.

The men had left doughnuts and bagels at the site, hoping the treats would lure a bear.

They did, but not the kind the hunters were expecting.

Search

It was about 11 a.m. when all hell — in the form of a massive male brown bear with claws as long as a man's fingers and paws as big as a human head — broke loose from where it was silently tucked in the alders, just a few yards away.



"It happened so quickly. He just sprung up and was bounding up the hill woofing with his ears back and head down," Zeek said.

Selinger estimates the bear weighed between 650 and 725 pounds, and may have been 20 years old or older based on the animal's worn-down teeth. Selinger also determined from numbers tattooed inside the animal's lip that it had had a run-in with Fish and Game in the past.

Photos by Joseph Robertia

Within two leaps and a matter of seconds the bear had closed almost 20 yards, Zeek said. There was only about 20 more yards separating the hunters and the still-charging bruin, so they opened fire with their .270 and 30.350 rifles.

"If I had had my rifle slung he would have smoked me," Zeek said.

Since they already had their weapons loaded and in hand, they were able to get off three or four shots.



A human hand is small in comparison to the big bruins' paw with claws several inches long.

Photos by Joseph Robertia

The bear veered off its charge, and the men said they knew finishing what they had started was the responsible thing to do.

"At that point you can't leave a bear wounded like that. You've got to finish it off, so we put a few more shots into it and that was it," Goff said.

The two men immediately contacted

bear-baiting station.

"I've been hunting this area since '99 and have never had brown bear problems in the past. This is the first year I've seen any," he said.

Selinger said that in 2005, only one of the 17 human-caused bear deaths on the Kenai Peninsula took place at a black bear-baiting station.

As per state regulations, Zeek and Goff skinned the animal and turned the hide and carcass over to Fish and Game.

Selinger said he was hoping the bear's remains could be used for educational purposes, possibly the skeleton would be re-articulated similar to the one in the Cooper Landing Museum.

"This is one of the biggest recorded brown bears on the peninsula and it's rare to get one in this condition," he said.

Selinger said many brown bears are taken in remote area where getting the entire carcasses out isn't feasible, or they come to Fish and Game after being road-killed, which damages the skeleton too much to use them for education.

"This one is in too good a condition not to make use of it," he said.

The shooting was the third recorded "defense of life and property" brown bear killing on the peninsula so far this year, and the first of two that happened over the weekend.

The second happened in Nikiski. At 1 a.m. Sunday a Nikiski woman shot a brown bear sow after the bruin and its two 2- to -3-year-old cubs charged her horses, Selinger said. Only the sow was shot.

The shooting took place off of Holt-Lamplight Road, near its connection to Escape Route Road where a bear carcass was illegally dumped within the last two weeks.

"This is another example of how illegal dumping may have drawn a bear into, or closer to, a populated area," Selinger said.

The first recorded DLP brown bear shooting of the year came May 1 at Solid Rock Bible Camp in Sterling. Livestock and animal feed kept at the camp may have drawn the sub-adult brown bear's attention, causing it to hang around the area. A resident tried to run it off, but when it didn't leave after the man shot over the bear's head, he shot the bear.

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