



Shotguns and Bears Beware

All NRCS Alaska employees that work in the field are required to take a full day Bear Behavior and Firearms Safety course, followed by a half day firearms proficiency certification class. The firearms proficiency certification class requires re-certification annually.

The Bear Behavior portion of the course focuses on the two types of bears that are commonly encountered in the field in Alaska. These are the Grizzly/Brown bear and the Black bear. The Grizzly/Brown bear are the same species, but are different in size due to habitat and food sources. The Brown bear is more of a coastal/forest bear and it has access to a large amount of protein by feeding on salmon through the summer and fall. These bears commonly grow to be 1000 to 1200 lbs and 10 ft tall (on their hind legs). The Grizzly bear is an interior bear and it does not have access to the salmon protein source. They are often more blonde colored and occupy the tundra regions of the state. These bears usually are in the 500 to 600 lb range and up to 8 ft in height. The grizzly/brown bear are not true hibernators and will stay active as long as there is food available. They also will rise from their den in the middle of winter during a warm spell. They have been observed a couple of different years in January by cross country skiers in an area called the stadium at Kincaid Park, just south of Anchorage International airport. The distinguishing characteristics between grizzly/brown bears and black bears is that the brown bear has a massive head, a dog face with an upturned muzzle, long claws, and a distinctive hump above its front shoulder blades. Black bears have a smaller, less robust build, a straight muzzle, no hump and shorter, curved claws. Both bears are omnivorous; they eat any high-protein, high-fat, high-energy food available. The grizzly/brown bear is more prone to maul humans when protecting a food cache or their young, whereas the black bear is more likely to stalk and kill humans. From 1900 to 1998, 189 bear attacks have been recorded, with only 30 fatalities.

NRCS field employees are issued 870 Remington shotguns for bear protection. How much each employee will handle the firearm is dependent upon their proficiency during firearm certification. To get certified to carry the firearm, employees are required to shoot two complete sequences of fire at a silhouette target, and one sequence at a charging target. The silhouette target is 8 ½" x 11" and is placed 15 yards from the firing line. 1) On command to fire from the instructor, the trainee starts with an empty chamber, the slide action closed and locked with the trigger safety on. The trainee must load a round into the chamber from a full magazine (4 rounds, all slugs). 2) The shotgun will be shouldered, aligned with the target, safety switched to fire position, and the round will be fired. Three more rounds from the magazine will be fired in rapid succession at the target. The four shots will be fired within a five second period. 3) Upon completion of firing, one additional round will be loaded directly into the chamber and fired at the target within a five second period. After firing, the safety will be moved to the safe position, the shell will be ejected from the chamber and the action will be left

open. 4) Certification requires that 70 % of the shots be on target and that all sequences be fired within the allowable time of ten seconds for one sequence. For a charging target/bear, the 8 ½" x 11" targets will start 25 yards from the firing line; three rounds will be in the magazine with the chamber empty. Upon the start of the target moving, the trainee will shoulder the shotgun and fire 3 rounds before the target gets to the firing line. To qualify as a shooter, 2 out of 3 shots need to be in the kill zone. To be a shotgun carrier, you need 1 out of 3 shots to be in the kill zone. If you hit 0 out of 3 shots in the kill zone, you are a statistic.

For other agencies that issue more than shotguns, the rifle qualification is the same as the shotgun. For a handgun, the handgun must be of adequate caliber, 44 Mag or larger and you must hit the stationary silhouette target 4 of 6 times and the charging target 3 of 6 times to be allowed to carry the firearm in the field.

It is also important to note that without firearms handling and shooting practice, your skills will fade dramatically. Therefore, before taking responsibility with other NRCS employees' lives, it is important that you put forth the effort to hone your skills, and recognize any firearm proficiency limitations you may have.

How often do we encounter bears on the job? This past summer we installed a site that bears frequented due to wild strawberries, but they left us and our equipment alone and we left them alone. However, in June 2006, an NRCS soil scientist in Homer was mauled by a brown bear less than 500 yards from his house while out on a Sunday morning walk with his dogs. As described by Mike, the soil scientist, the sounds he heard right before the bear attack were those of a dying moose calf he figured the bear had just taken. The bear was probably protecting his food cache. Bear encounters are quite frequent and do occur anywhere in Alaska. The NRCS provides excellent training to avoid bears and then if necessary to protect yourself. Bears Beware!



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