



Grizzly Bear Predation on a Bison Calf

by Nathan Varley

I observed the event through a 40x spotting scope while Bob Landis filmed and Joel Sartore took still photographs. The film footage allowed repeated review, enabling us to clearly describe the incident, which was observed from a vehicle pullout along the Grand Loop Road in Hayden Valley at approximately 7:30 A.M. on June 26, 2000. An adult female grizzly bear accompanied by two cubs-of-the-year was foraging approximately 2.5 km away, on a southwest-facing slope on the northeast side of the Yellowstone River.

The sow was picking around in the sagebrush, foraging on roots and possibly searching for a late elk calf, as there were several elk scattered along the treeline beyond the bears. As the three bears moved downslope toward the river, a cow bison and her calf walked southeast along a bench on its northeast side. No other bison were visible in the area. When the cow and calf approached the base of the slope on which the bears were foraging, they began to trot, the cow in the lead, in what appeared to be an attempt to quickly skirt past and below the bears.

The adult grizzly, approximately 200 meters upslope from the bison, stood up on her hind legs and looked at the cow and calf. Those of us gathered in the pullout briefly discussed the possibility of the bear pursuing these bison, but didn't give it much likelihood. Nevertheless, we were thinking about climbing a nearby hill in order to gain a better vantage when the sow made an unexpected decision. She dropped down to all four legs and ran down the slope in pursuit of the bison, leaving her cubs behind. At this point, the cow changed position and ran behind her calf, keeping herself between it and the bear. In a matter of seconds, the bear had closed the gap and was within a few meters of the fleeing cow and calf.

The chase proceeded west toward the riverbank and reached a swale approximately 1 km from the observers. High sage and this low spot partially obscured our view of what happened at that point. As the bear started to pass the cow, the cow changed direction as if to cut the bear off and confront her. But the bear veered past the cow and continued after the calf. When the three animals emerged from the swale, the calf was running out in front, followed by the bear and then the cow. As the bear drew near the calf, the calf turned and ran in tighter and tighter circles. The chase moved back into the swale again, obscuring the view. It appeared that the bear reached out and swatted the calf down

with its paw. It then made contact again and appeared to bite the calf before jumping out of the way of the charging cow, which lowered its head and appeared to hook at the bear with its horns.

The bear reappeared from the swale, holding the calf in its mouth with the cow chasing it. It stopped, dropped the calf, and stood its ground over the calf while facing the cow. Momentarily, the cow stopped pursuing it. It remained 20–30 meters away, circling and occasionally rushing in and hooking its horns at the bear, but always quickly retreated when the bear did not run. After the cow stopped charging, the bear began to consume the calf. The cow stayed nearby and occasionally nibbled grass. After the bear had been feeding on the calf for approximately 15 minutes, the cow abruptly ran north and did not return.

The bear fed on the calf for about 30 minutes, then spent approximately 10 minutes covering the carcass with dirt, grass, and branches it broke from sagebrush. By this time, her cubs had moved across the

slope approximately 300 meters to the east and far up slope from the kill site. The cubs often stood up and looked around. The adult bear then moved directly east up slope to her cubs, and led them up a long draw and into a forested area and out of sight. The adult female grizzly bear and two cubs returned to the carcass at approximately 7:45 P.M., uncovered it, and fed on it at least until 9:30 P.M., when it became too dark to see.

Most bison calves in YNP are born in early May, and calving is generally over by the end of that month, although a few calves are born as late as September. Based on horn size, body size, and coloration, retired Yellowstone biologist Mary Meagher estimated that the bison calf was seven to eight weeks old.

Ungulate meat is one of the most concentrated sources of digestible energy and protein available to grizzly bears in the Yellowstone ecosystem. Grizzly bears obtain ungulate meat primarily through scavenging winter-killed and wolf-killed elk and bison carrion and predation on

elk calves. Although predation on elk calves in Yellowstone by both grizzly bears and black bears has been well documented, we are not aware of any records in the literature of bear predation on bison calves. Given the frequency that park employees and visitors observe grizzly bear predation on elk calves, we believe that predation on bison calves is an infrequent, opportunistic event or it would be reported more frequently. 🌲

Nathan Varley has lived in Yellowstone Park for more than 20 years. In 1994, he earned a M.S. in Fish and Wildlife Management at Montana State University, studying mountain goat ecology in the Absaroka Range. Since then he has worked with a variety of wildlife species including wolves, moose, and otters. More recently, he has been instrumental in the creation of a biological consulting company which specializes in ecological research, filming, and interpretive enterprises in Yellowstone.

Grizzly Bear Attacks Bull Bison

by Travis Wyman

On September 23, 2000, I responded to a common call of a grizzly bear and her two cubs-of-the-year in front of the Lake Lodge. The bears were digging for pocket gophers and grazing vegetation in the meadow adjacent to this facility. Several different bears use this meadow along the lake shore, not only for its concentration of high quality bear foods (*i.e.*, local cutthroat trout spawning streams, vegetation communities, elk calf populations), but also because an old road bed extends from this part of the Lake area to the Yellowstone River 1.5 miles away, serving as a convenient travel corridor between the two locations. These particular bears had frequented the area all season.

A large, wet snow of about six inches had fallen the previous evening, strand-

ing a number of park visitors due to road closures and poor traveling conditions. Therefore, it was an unusually large group of people for the time of year that gathered to watch the bears grub and dig while waiting for road closures to lift and conditions to improve. I monitored the bears for several hours, interpreting them for visitors and watching to make sure that both bears and people were kept safe.

Around noon, the bears began to follow the old road toward the Fishing Bridge area to the east. As this is a regular pattern for bears frequenting the area, I realized that they would most likely reach the main road between the Lake Village and Fishing Bridge Junction sometime in the next hour or so, and asked several rangers to assist with the bear jam which

would probably result. At around 1:00 P.M., the bears showed up at Fishing Bridge Junction. We blocked traffic and allowed them to cross the road safely.

Once across the road, the sow walked into an area where a young adult bull bison was laying under a tree. The bison stood up abruptly, which startled the bears. The sow then stood up on her hind legs, and the cubs followed her example. The bison assumed an alerted posture, with his tail raised and his head lowered, and stood his ground approximately 15 feet away from her. The bear lunged forward as if in a bluff charge, probably in defense of her cubs. This convinced the bison to turn and start trotting away, along a bench directly above the road to Fishing Bridge. The sow engaged in a slow chase, appear-