Grizzly Attack

I never heard a man holler like that. ... I could hear the bones crunching.” — Gary Corle

It was the most agonizing scream I ever heard,” remembers Gary Corle. “Johnny was literally being torn to pieces.”

“Johnny” is Pastor Johnny McCoy of North Pole (Alaska) First Baptist church. Corle is McCoy’s close friend and a deacon in the church. For several years the pair had partnered on annual moose hunts near Delta Junction, Alaska. On Sept. 3, 2001, they embarked on another hunt together.

Within a day, that trip would become very different from the others, and McCoy would be fighting for his life.

On Sept. 4, the pair was scouting for signs of moose when they chanced into the territory of a sow grizzly bear and her two cubs.
PREVENTING GRIZZLY BEAR ATTACKS

Here are a few things to remember when you are in grizzly country.

1. Be aware of your surroundings. Understand the potential exists to encounter a grizzly bear. Look for grizzly signs: scat (droppings), claw marks on trees, torn-up stumps, covered animal or food cache, well-worn trails, etc.

2. Listen for sounds that may indicate a grizzly, especially a sow with cubs. If you see cubs, be aware the sow is nearby.

3. Have a bell on a backpack, or talk loudly and make noise in dense vegetation when hiking in grizzly country.

4. Never bring and/or store food in your tent.

5. Carry a good bear spray and know how and when to use it.

6. If a bear is encountered:
   a. Stop immediately, and look for an escape route. Back away slowly and speak in a calm voice. Never run!
   b. If attacked, drop to the ground facedown, and curl away slowly and speak in a calm voice. Never run!

McCoy was in agony. His scalp had been peeled back, an ear hung below his chin, and an eyeball dropped from its socket. Corle did his best to bind McCoy’s injuries and staunch the flow of blood. He thought his friend would die. When he spotted the cubs in a nearby tree he knew they had to get away … fast.

Their camp lay 2 1/2 miles away, but it seemed more like 200. Corle gently helped McCoy to his feet. Step by agonizing step, McCoy stumbled blindly behind Corle, touching his backpack, as Corle guided him and kept watch for the grizzly. Praying through every pain-wracked step, they called out to the only Source that could help them.

Somehow, they finally reached their camp. But even here there was a problem. Corle’s good-natured rules for hunting trips included no alarm clocks or cell phones, and the plane wasn’t due to pick them up for nearly two weeks. Here McCoy confessed he’d broken his friend’s rule; at the last moment he had packed a cell phone. Elated, Corle frantically called 911.

Two hours later an Army helicopter with a rescue team appeared, stabilized McCoy and rushed him to Memorial Hospital in Fairbanks. That last-minute decision to pack a cell phone “literally saved my life,” McCoy says.

Renowned plastic surgeon Dr. William Wenner had pieced McCoy together again. McCoy and Wenner had faced one of the worst bear-attack cases in history. The wrecked man was wheeled into the operating room.

Wenner was unexpectedly in Alaska. He had a fish dinner with friends and was scheduled to return in a few days. But the bear attack extended his stay. McCoy and rushed him to Memorial Hospital in Fairbanks.

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