



Alaska Snow Survey Bear Tale

On May 29, 1992, George Clagett, Alaska Snow Survey Supervisor from 1976 to 1993, had been King salmon fishing on the Kenai River and was headed back to Anchorage when he decided to stop by a SNOTEL site to do some early season maintenance. The site is located in the Kenai Moose Refuge on the Kenai Peninsula of Alaska. The moose refuge is a series of large pens, one inside the other, that hold moose in a several square mile area in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The resident moose are part of a cooperative research project conducted by the State of Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The site had a punch tape recorder on a snow pillow and a rocket-type precipitation gauge. Stopping by this site required an 1 ½ hr detour one way on a gravel road, off the Sterling Highway which led back to Anchorage. The recorders had stilling wells and the precipitation gauge needed to be drained so it would not overflow. When George drove up to the site, which is about 100 feet from the one lane, gravel access road, a good-sized black bear stood upright on its hind legs next to the snow pillow and put its paw on one of the 5 foot stakes marking the corners of the snow pillow. The bear had his nose up in the air testing the wind and it would have been a great picture with the bear, shelter, precipitation gauge, and snow pillow. However, George did not have his camera. The bear wandered off as George got out of his Ford Ranger and walked down the path to the site. After performing the necessary maintenance at the site, George returned to his pickup truck to find a hip boot hanging halfway out of the tailgate and the black plastic bag which held the 25 lb King salmon he had just caught, gone from the bed of his truck, never to be seen again. It turns out that the black bear had probably smelled the fish as George pulled up, and so it circled around and snatched the tasty fish out of the pickup while George was busy working on the site.

The very next year, on June 2 1993, George was back at the same site to perform the early season maintenance. This time he was prepared with his personal Nikon camera, however, no bears were present upon his arrival at the site. George began to drain the precipitation gauge, and then he got distracted and busy working on something else. He forgot about the precipitation gauge and when he realized it, it was too late. George had drained the gauge dry, no more fluid. About a mile from the site is the refuge caretaker's cabin where he went to get some water to add to the gauge so it would be functional through the summer. Upon returning from the cabin with the water, there were three bears at the site, a sow with 2 cubs. As George approached the site, he saw the bears so he revved up his engine and came to a quick stop in hopes of scaring the bears away. The noise scared the two cubs up a birch tree next to the shelter and made 'Momma' bear mad. Unfortunately,

when George had left the site to go fetch the water, he left the tools and his camera in somewhat disarray near the shelter. The Nikon camera was sitting on top of his camera bag exposed. With the two cubs up the tree, and momma not willing to go very far from the cubs, George sat in his pickup to think about the predicament he was in. When George finally got out of his pickup, the sow angrily snapped her jaws as a warning so he got back into the truck. Soon he got out again and she charged at him down the path, luckily it was a false charge. This happened a couple of times. George stayed near the truck but never retreated, thinking he could jump in the pickup in time if the charge was not false. Bears are very fast and extremely strong and I am not sure how close I would let one get to me. Meanwhile, the sow started snooping around the tools and the two cubs were still up the tree. She began to snoop around George's Nikon camera and he knew that with one bite, she could put it out of commission. Sitting and watching the bear check out his camera was too much for George to take so he made a risky and brave decision and made a mad rush at the bear and chased her off from the site. She moved away from the site but she was still really agitated, snapping her jaws at George because the cubs were still up the tree next to the shelter. Quickly, George gathered up his camera and tools and put water in the precipitation gauge. The whole time momma bear was within 50 to 60 feet of him snapping jaw mad. As he was headed back down the trail with his gear to his pickup 100 feet away, he saw momma bear jump in the back of his truck and lift up his spare tire in her teeth and pitch out of the truck 15 or 20 feet away. The bear was mad, George was mad too and he chased her out of his pickup. George retrieved his flat spare tire and put the tools in his truck and his camera bag in the cab. Fortunately, George did not need his spare tire on the trip back to Anchorage, 1 ½ hr of dirt and another 2 ½ hr by pavement, the spare tire was ruined with numerous puncture holes in the sidewalls. George had established dominance by not retreating from the bear's false charges, but ended up losing a spare tire in the end.

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