

Branding Iron



Corby Ward,
Chief Brand Inspector
Bismarck



The mornings are starting to feel more like fall. It's becoming that time of year when all your jackets and sweaters end up in the back seat of the pickup because the mornings are cool, but it warms up enough to shed some layers in the afternoon.

The fall run has started, and the busiest time of the year for brand inspectors is here. In the last couple weeks, there's been a bucking horse sale, yearling sales and the Hermanson/Kist Horse Sale. We've also seen some bawling calves coming to town from some drier areas around the country.

Last month, I wrote about different encounters with black bears. That reminded me of some times that I've run into grizzly bears in the mountains of Montana. When I first got out of high school, I worked for an outfitter that was based in a backcountry camp about a mile north of the Yellowstone National Park line.

I'd spent my whole life up to that point in Montana and had spent a lot of time in the mountains, but I'd never seen or been around a grizzly bear. There was another guy who worked with me that first summer. He was a good guy, but he was deathly afraid of bears, even though he hadn't seen one yet. But, after the first couple of weeks of being in camp, that changed. We'd

seen lots of tracks of bears around, but hadn't seen any bears.

The outfitter had two Airedale dogs as camp dogs, and they were very good at keeping bears out of the camp. We had a week, though, when we had one bear that kept coming through the camp every night. The bear didn't hurt anything, but we couldn't have it around with guests and ourselves either. One particular bear didn't seem to care about the dogs and would just wander the camp trying to find something to get into.

The Forest Service gave us crack-er shells for shotguns, which basically are a large firecracker in a shotgun shell and, when you shoot it, they fly out and then go off, making a loud bang. Thanks to the bear frequenting camp every night, the last sound I would hear before going to sleep was my co-worker racking a shell into the shotgun. This guy would lie awake most of the night worrying that the bear was going to grab him out of the tent. I'm not saying that it couldn't happen, but it wasn't a big enough concern that I wasn't going to get some sleep.

One night, I woke up to my co-worker jumping out of bed, shouting that the bear was in our tent. This particular tent was a 12-foot-by-14-foot tent with another open-ended 12-foot-by-14-foot tent attached to it that we used as a tack room.

I jumped out of my bunk, grabbed a shotgun and flashlight and, right as my co-worker was about to shoot, we saw in the light that instead of a bear, our visitor was actually one of the horses looking for some grain. Luckily, the horse didn't get shot, nobody got mauled by a bear and we were able to go back to bed. However, the next morning, my co-worker decided that living in a camp in the wilderness with bears wasn't the job for him.

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