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SEQUOIA NATURE GUIDE SERVICE

The California Grizzly

The history of the California Grizzly Bear (*Ursus henschawi*) in the Sequoia National Park region has been a closed chapter in the book of nature for a period of 40 years. Yet now, after four decades, the chapter has opened again. A grizzly has been seen in the park.

California Official State Animal Still lives.

Under date of November 6, 1924, Superintendent White issued a press bulletin conveying the information that a large grizzly bear had recently been seen within the Sequoia National Park. This news aroused the interest of many a California citizen; many were proud that the California Official State animal was still among us; but some were loath to believe it.

That a California grizzly bear is now living within the Sequoia National Park, or the territory thereabouts, there seems no shadow of doubt. So convincing are the reports, and so accurate the description given of the animal seen by numerous persons on various occasions, that no longer can their reports be discredited or disbelieved. The most important reports of which we have record are as follows:

On August 7, 1921, eleven park visitors reported having seen a large gray bear at the Giant Forest "Bear Pit" that was practically twice in size of the other adult black and brown bears. That this particular bear had a distinct hump on the top of its shoulders, and when the animal appeared in sight the other bears all ran hastily away. During the month of April, 1924, Mr. James B. Small and his road working crew of several men, reported on several occasions having seen a large grizzly colored bear in the vicinity of their road camp near Moro Rock. Mr. Small, and some of his men, had previously worked in Yellowstone National Park, where grizzly bear are numerous, and all these men pronounced the bear they saw as a grizzly. They all made mention of the hump the bear had on the top of its shoulders. On October 13, 1924, Mr. Alfred Hengst, a cattleman of Three Rivers, came into very close contact with a huge bear near the head waters of Cliff Creek. Undoubtedly this bear was the same animal as seen by others, for this is the description that he gives: "It was the biggest bear I ever saw - bigger than any cow, and looked as though sprinkled over with snow. I had a close view of the beast which was undoubtedly a grizzly."

In addition to the above, several persons at various times during the last three years have reported having seen bear tracks within the park that were over 12 inches in length and 6 inches in width. Such tracks are much larger than those made by either the black or brown bears.

Two Adventures with Grizzlies.

The first white settlers who came to the Sequoia National Park region all proclaim that grizzly bear inhabited all along the foothills of Tulare County, and that the species lingered for many years thereafter within the territory now embraced in the Sequoia National Park. Many are the thrilling stories that I have been told by these sturdy pioneers of the encounters they had either in

killing or attempting to kill grizzlies, all of which took place within the Sequoia National Park region. There are three of these adventures of which I have record that I obtained from individuals who were parties in the affray. The first of these reports is the one I obtained from the late Joseph Palmer, a hunter and trapper, on November 5, 1906. The report he gave me is as follows:

"It was during the month of November, 1865, while asleep in my cabin up on the South Fork of the Kaweah River, that I was suddenly awakened by the loud squealing of my hog that was in a log pen that stood about 50 feet away. The night was quite dark, but nevertheless, I grabbed my single shot rifle, dashed out in my night clothes and jumped over into the pen. Just then I saw a large, dark animal reared up in front of me with the hog in its mouth and attempting to climb out of the pen, which was about six feet in height. I jumped forward, jabbed the muzzle of my rifle against the animal and fired. The shot broke the animals back a little behind its shoulders and it fell over backwards against me with such force as to cause me to fall, and the bawling bear and squealing hog were almost on top of me. Never in my life was I so badly scared. After gaining my feet I cleared that log crib fence at one jump, ran to my cabin where I remained the rest of the night; but further sleep for me was impossible.

"On going out next morning I was greatly surprised to find that it was a grizzly that I had killed. It was a male animal and weighed 967 pounds actual weight. The hog the bear had killed I used as food, and I kept the bear's pelt for many years thereafter as a gentle reminder of that exciting night."

The second report of which I have record is that given me by Mr. Bernard Mehrten, a stockman and farmer of Three Rivers, on November 5, 1924. His report is as follows:

"In company with Henry Mehrten and William Lusky, were camped with our sheep at Alta Meadows which is now in Sequoia National Park, during the summer of 1877. We saw some tremendous big bear tracks near our camp and decided we would get him. We used a sheep for bait and set two guns for him. Along in the night we heard one of the guns go off. Next morning we found that the bear had been crippled, and we followed his tracks down into "Hell Hole" (now Buck Canyon) where we shot and killed him. It was a monstrous male grizzly. One man guessed its weight at 1800 pounds, but of course it did not weigh that much. I believe the animal would have weighed over 1000 pounds."

Last Adventure with Grizzlies in 1881

My third report comes from Superior Judge W. B. Wallace, of Visalia, by letter to this office under date of November 25, 1924. Although the Judge failed to get his bear, nevertheless, his report is one of fascination and thrilling interest; for this is what he says:

"It was either during the late spring of the year 1880 or 1881 that I was camped for about a week at Hospital Rock on the Kaweah. I was alone, having my saddle horse and pack horse. It was there that I saw the two bear that I concluded were grizzlies. I was familiar with the appearance of all other bear in that and neighboring regions. These two were radically different from any of them - somewhat lighter color than the big brown bear, and one of them seemed much larger. I have seen grizzly bears since that were very similar to those two. Old hunters to whom I described them pronounced them grizzlies. Never before nor since have I seen any similar bear in our mountains. They came out of the thick brush at the head of those ravines to northeast of Hospital Rock somewhere in the vicinity where the Tharp Trail was. I saw them every day for four or five days, but they never came far below the brush out on the open oak ridges.

I made several ineffectual efforts to get near enough to them to shoot one. Usually when they were out the wind was blowing up stream, and it was useless to try to approach them from below. Several times I tried to get near where they would come out from the brush, but invariably they came out on another ridge too far away. Finally I hid early in an oak tree about the middle of things, on one of their cross trails, and I think the big one would have come right up to me if another bear had not got frightened and made such a noise that the big one left the trail.

"The next day I took the same position and the smaller of the two came out of the brush and up a ravine to a point about a hundred yards away. He stood quartering towards me on a steep hillside but presented a fine target. I fired and he fell but was up in an instant looking towards me, but evidently did not see me, and before I could reload and shoot again he dropped out of sight behind some brush. I waited to see if he wouldn't again come in view and after a short time I saw him about 250 yards away just at the edge of the thick brush where he laid down in a sunny spot and was evidently hit hard. Perhaps if I had let him alone he would have died there, but I aimed high and shot again. He flattened out at the crack of the gun and then crawled into the dense brush where it was so thick that one would have to crawl to get through it. So I did not follow him. If I had had a good revolver I would have gone after him, but I had none. I never saw the big bear again."

"My favorite hunting place for some years was at Redwood Meadow. There game was abundant on all sides. The year previous to going to Hospital Rock, I was in camp at Redwood when J. W. Crowley and Presbyterian minister of Visalia, Mr. Smith, came there. Smith was a very bright and intelligent young man, a great lover of the out-of-doors and of hunting. He was a very good shot, and I learned that he had had much experience in the woods. The next day after Smith came into camp we went hunting in separate directions. I went over the ridges to the south-east, and in going to the top of a steep pitch in the brush I saw a remarkably big brown bear right in front of me standing quartering towards me and not far away. I killed several deer at double the distance and felt sure that this was "my bear". I was a good shot at that time and fired deliberately. The bear jumped with lightning quickness and plunged into brush and I never saw it again. I had aimed right behind the shoulder and by "all rules of the game" should have knocked it down. I was extremely disappointed and could not understand how I could have missed my mark. That was in the morning. During the afternoon Smith went hunting up along River Valley. On returning near the old crossing of the Kaweah below the Sugar Bowl, he saw an immense brown bear just across the river from him where the canyon walls are very steep. As he told the story that night in camp, it was not a hundred yards away, and Smith fired at it when it looked more startled than hurt. He fired a second time at it standing broadside. Then it saw him and rushed up a little incline on a game trail leading down to the river evidently with the intention of crossing. It was coming for him and meant to fight. Just as it started down to the river Smith shot it again in the neck, when it plunged down head first falling between two logs lying close together, with such force that it was pinned fast. A log extended across the water at that point and Smith crossed on the log to where the bear was wedged fast, and to see whether it was alive or not hit it on the rump with a club. The effect was electric, the bear with a mighty surge freed itself from the logs and started for Smith. He fired at its forehead, being close to it, and killed it. Upon removing its hide he found that all the bullets he fired at it, except the last had penetrated but a little way under the skin. The Winchester of that model was too light an arm for big bear. I thought that accounted for not getting "my bear" in the morning."

"I never saw a fighting bear in the mountains and did not regard any of them as dangerous. I have often thought, however, when I shot that one from the tree that if I had been on the ground and it had seen me that it would have "come for me."

It will be noted from these reports that the one submitted by Judge Wallace closed the chapter in the history of the grizzly bear in the Sequoia National Park region in 1881; but it has been revived again in 1921 and 1924 after a lapse of 40 years.

Former Abundance of Grizzly

In the early history of California, grizzly bear were fairly abundant in many parts of the state. They were most plentiful along the coast regions. The inroad of settlement, the persistent hunting and trapping of the animal for trophy and on account of its alleged bad morals, reduced their population so rapidly that the species became practically wiped out before people realized what was happening, or an effort could be made to save them. Most naturalists are reasonably certain that the California grizzly bear is now extinct. But it now appears that in the Sequoia National Park one lone grizzly still survives, one specimen of the thousands which formerly roamed the foothills and mountains of California.

Prior to the arrival of white men in California, the California grizzly bear, unlike most wild animals, had practically nothing to fear or disturb his peace and happiness. True, once in a great while the Indians succeeded in killing an animal, but such instances were very rare. The grizzly had no other animal of its range to dread as an enemy, for as a fighter he was a master of all of them. Neither were there hard laws of nature against which the animals had to combat in order to survive and perpetuate their kind. Through thousands of generations they kept on living and breeding under natural conditions, with little or nothing to disturb them.

Grizzly Not Dangerous

Contrary to the general impression, the California Grizzly is not a dangerous animal and will give man a wide berth. His food is largely acorns, berries, roots, grasses and grubs, as he is not equipped by nature to pursue and kill for food. The grizzly is even less carnivorous by nature than the smaller black or brown bear.

The California Grizzly is the largest of the grizzly species, considerably larger than the Rocky Mountain Grizzly of which many specimens still exist in the Yellowstone National Park where they are a great attraction to visitors.

Hope For the Last Grizzly.

Whether or not the large grizzly recently seen within the Sequoia National Park is a remnant survival of the California species, or is a Silver-tip that has drifted in from the Rockies, will never be known, unless the animal is either killed or captured. He cannot be harmed in the park, but may drift outside. But let us hope that it may be, as it probably is, one of the California species and that the animal may be permitted to live and find for itself a mate somewhere in the fastness of the Sierras, and that the progeny they bring forth will again restore the species to grace the face of our California soil.

It would indeed be lamentable if the last of the grizzlies, the last animal emblematic of our noble state of California, should fall victim to some thoughtless hunter.