



WHEN THINGS GO WRONG OUTSIDE

A bear encounter that starts with a curious canter

By Karen McColl | Illustrated by Cass Collins

“Bear.”
The grizzly is about 300 m away, looking at us. I move closer to my two friends. We wave our arms and calmly tell the bear we mean no harm. Someone snaps a pic. Suddenly, the bear is cantering towards us. This is not good.

Our encounter with “Thomas” happens mere hours into a three-day hiking and packrafting trip. We are on foot, looking for a place to camp across from the spectacular Donjek Glacier in Kluane National Park and Reserve. To our left is a steep drop into a canyon and to our right, bush.

It doesn’t take Thomas long to close in on us. My friend fires her air horn, purchased earlier that day in Haines Junction. Pzzzzzf. I’ll never forget the look on her face as she realizes it has somehow depressurized. Bear sprays in hand, we yell at the bear to stop. We stomp our feet. When he (we later determined it was a male, likely a young adult) ceases his approach, about 15 m away, we slowly back away, moving out of his path. Walking now, he redirects toward us. We stop and hold our ground.

He stops. We pick up rocks and wave our hiking poles. He starts towards us again. At one point the bruin lays on his stomach, paws out, gaze intent. It reminds me of a dog poised for play. But this is no game. Now just feet from us, I brace for a fight. A light wind is blowing crosswise to the bear’s approach. I want a point-blank shot with my bear spray, so I wait.

Inch by inch, over half an hour, we put more space between us and Thomas. But what if he’s the conniving type? Will he feign disinterest only to ambush us later? We watch through binoculars as he moseys into the bush and grazes. Finally satisfied of his pre-occupation, and needing to move before dark, we backtrack a kilometre, blow up our rafts, and paddle to the other side of the Kluane River. We establish camp on a large gravel bank with good visibility. I offer to sleep in the middle of the tent. As we settle in for the night, we give our intimidator a name. “Thomas,” we decide, is kind and gentle. He doesn’t attack people in tents. With that reassuring narrative, I fall asleep. Fortunately, we don’t see Thomas or any of his ursine friends for the rest of the trip. Y

For information about what to do in a bear encounter, go to yukon.ca/bears