

Meet the baddest bear in the bush

Dan LeGrandeur develops non-lethal tactics that let bruins know who's boss

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EDMONTON / A dramatic educational video shows how well Dan LeGrandeur learned to turn brushes with the strongest jaws in the woods into bloodless encounters.

The scene opens with a big black bear digging up snacks in a rubbish heap. Enter LeGrandeur, a husky 43-year-old son of southern Alberta ranchers with a gruff voice and an iron handshake.

The bear does a shuffle, unsure whether to charge, run for it or just keep munching. The bruin turns away, slowly. LeGrandeur advances, yells, draws a pyrotechnic pistol and shoots. Fireworks explode with a startling amount of noise, howling screams and hissing smoke trails. The bear picks up the pace to a full trot.

The bear returns the next day. But this time LeGrandeur only has to step into view for the animal to take to its heels, and stay away. Its previous experience was unpleasant enough to instill a flight reflex.

Similar techniques work on bigger grizzlies, with modifications recognizing their extra power and nastier temperament. Getting their attention can include smacking their backsides with rubber bullets or beanbags fired from shotguns.

LeGrandeur learned his business the hard way, up close and personal with wildlife. He built Bear Scare Ltd. into a coaching service for industry, law enforcement agencies and local governments on an average of 500 bruin encounters a year for 15 years.

His Edmonton firm's contribution to a new wildlife awareness course by Enform, Alberta's industry-sponsored oil and gas trades training operation, marks a turning point -- workers are learning to adapt to nature instead of killing it.

LeGrandeur practises a craft known as "non-lethal bear management." A sideline has lately emerged in coping with cougars as a result of encounters with the big cats in Alberta and British Columbia.

"It's about cohabitation," said Mike Doyle, Calgary president of the Canadian Association of Geophysical Contractors.



CREDIT: John Lucas, The Journal

Dan LeGrandeur teaches how to confront bears rather than submitting meekly.

The new Enform course is supported by the CAGC, Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and Petroleum Services Association of Canada.

Besides LeGrandeur, contributors include celebrated bear conservationist Steve Herrero and experts in natural hazards from rutting elk to poisonous plants and biting, disease carrying insects.

"We did things with little care for conserving the environment," Doyle said in acknowledging the rough and tumble past of a traditionally macho oilfield labour force.

"The world has changed completely. We're all sharing the same landscape," Doyle said.

"The trouble with humans is we expand relentlessly to the despair of every other being on this Earth. How do we do a better job of co-existing with wildlife?"

Answers taught by LeGrandeur were learned in his first career as a B.C. conservation officer. "I got tired of shooting bears. I have a real passion for them. I've been blessed by the experience I've been able to have with those animals," he said.

In bear encounters, kindness kills. Gently retreating makes the animals bold and puts them on a path to lethal conflicts.

"Bears live by their stomachs," LeGrandeur said. "They have a hierarchical society. Dominant bears get the food and the mates. The meanest, nastiest, snappiest bear gets to eat the most. You can see that at salmon streams, for instance," he said.

"Actual contacts (fights) are very rare. Dominance is established by power displays, huffing, snapping jaws and popping teeth," LeGrandeur said.

"Bears are highly intelligent animals. They will do that same thing with people."

Timidly surrendering a garbage dump, food cache, barbecue or bird feeder to a bear encourages the animal to keep coming around by catering to its natural confidence in being the dominant power.

Masters of non-lethal wildlife management employ their pyrotechnic devices, sprays and stinging firearms to make themselves in effect the baddest bears.

The technique requires practice, knowledge of bear body language and nerve. "It's often hard to intimidate a 600- to 800-pound (270- to 360-kilogram) grizzly," LeGrandeur said.

He has a hair-raising training video that shows a wildlife officer standing up to an annoyed grizzly running in circles and making repeated bluff charges.

Experienced hands stay wary, on the alert for telltale signs of when bluff ends.

"I don't take any bear encounters lightly," LeGrandeur said, adding: "I still have all my fingers and toes for a reason."

His methods are spreading everywhere bears occur across North America.

In the mountain recreation community of Whistler, LeGrandeur introduced the world's first municipal non-lethal bear management program. In the first year, bear shootings dropped to five from a former bloodbath of 25 to 30.

In Connecticut, the Edmonton bear expert taught 17 police departments and

packed rooms full of homeowners trying to cope with black bears in the wooded suburban landscape of a northeastern United States.

Other clients of Bear Scare training range from the RCMP to Halliburton Energy Services and Suncor.

"Industry is changing," LeGrandeur said.

"They realize they have to be more environmentally responsible. This is one of the ways of doing that. It's nice to see this change."

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