



Pink Tights in Denali

In bear country when the going gets tough, the tough borrow underwear. But is it grizzly-proof?

BY DORIS ECKER

Spot the grizzly: blueberry season in Denali National Park. The mighty mountain also known as Mt McKinley dominates the horizon

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» We start out conscientiously, even obsessively, to follow the advice given by Denali Park rangers. We watch the compulsory bear-awareness video at the ranger station and read the handy leaflet. In preparation for our four-day backpacking epic, we have scoured websites and read our way through piles of guidebooks. We know the rules by heart.

NO. 1 Make grizzlies aware of your presence—do not surprise them

Scorning meek bear bells, Rodger and I set off with tinnitus-inducing “bear-awareness devices”: stainless-steel travel mugs filled with coins. I am too apprehensive to do anything but make the change rattle incessantly, so it falls to my tall, athletic husband to make more noise. And so we cross rivers, walk through dense tundra and climb ever steeper slopes to renderings of Beatles, Bob Dylan and Rodger’s British school hymns.

NO. 2 Cooking with bears

At the end of a long day, we set up camp according to the backcountry-camping leaflet: an imaginary triangle measuring a hundred yards downwind from tent to camping stove and again to the bear-resistant food containers (BRFC). This keeps humans and food well apart and theoretically prevents cooking fumes from turning our tent into an alluring walk-in buffet. Disquieting questions the leaflet forgets to answer: when cooking pasta and sauce, how do you “calmly pack all your food items back in the BRFC, seal it securely, and back away slowly” should a bear approach? If the wind changes, do you move tent and stove, panic, or just go to bed and resign yourself to becoming a midnight snack?

NO. 3 Grizzlies are diurnal but primarily nocturnal

I can hear huffing and puffing outside. In the dead of night, being inside a tent does not feel as safe as I imagined. I am convinced the bear might actually be enticed by the extra wrapper. And I am sure it will eat me, the small blond one, first, especially since I have a handful of almonds tucked into the pocket of my coat-turned-pillow. Choosing between self-defense and the possibility that my husband is making the unsettling noise, I let fatigue finally out-strip panic. Early next morning, we find a trail of fresh grizzly footprints on the banks of the nearby river.

NO. 4 Interpreting the signs of grizzly presence

As the days wear on, we ease into the idea of co-existing with nature, including bears. However, we would be hard pushed to ignore the fresh bear scat on the ground, dug-up soil on plants along our way and the occasional claw marks high up on tree trunks. So we burst into

pre-emptive song occasionally and adjust our route away from telltale signs. We convince ourselves that in the middle of a lush berry summer, our secretive companion will hardly be tempted to check out the caloric value of a pair of hikers, even in a late-July feeding frenzy.

NO. 5 A grizzly’s sense of smell is seven times more acute than ours

By the end of Day Three, most of our clothes are saturated with honest hikers’ sweat. This is a bit of a blow to our strategy of avoiding odorous items while in bear country. If a bear can smell deodorant and cereal bars from miles away, how will he be able to ignore the lure of ...us?

NO. 6 Bears do actually have pretty good eyesight

Rain and sleet have also caught up with us during the last 36 hours and almost everything we carry is soaked. Sporting my last dry top, garish with psychedelic patterns, I offer Rodger our only other piece of remaining clothing: my candy-pink cotton tights. Attired in dancer’s leggings, who needs to sing to avoid surprise encounters?

NO. 7 When in immediate proximity to a bear, retreat swiftly

Hell-bent on taking the fastest route back to the shuttle station, we choose a “shortcut.” Unfortunately it leads right across an extensive stretch of blueberry bushes. We realize that in one fell swoop, we have broken every rule in the hiking-with-bears book: we smell from 10 miles upwind, we are too exhausted to make any noise other than puffing, we are dressed like clowns, and we are walking through prime berry real estate. Tufts of grizzly hair hang from branches and bear-sized molds shape broken shrubbery. But the gods (and grizzlies) have mercy on us and we make it to the road unscathed in record time.

NO. 8 A grizzly can outrun a moose

The day-tourists on the shuttle bus give us a wide berth. Either they are as smell-sensitive as bears or they take exception to Rodger’s pink pantyhose. “Grizzly!” shouts one of them excitedly. From the secure cocoon of the bus we finally set eyes on “our” bear, watching him chase and bring down a huge moose in under 12 seconds. Bet you it didn’t follow the rules. **W**