

Title:

Montana's Pyramid Pass and the Adventure that was Bear-ly There!

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996

Summary:

The trek to Pyramid Pass: A Montana Adventure with "no major problem" paired with "bear along the trail"

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Montana, Bob Marshall Wilderness, Pyramid Pass, bear, grizzly bear, hike, hiking, Swan Range,

Article Body:

As common courtesy on Montana trails, folks warn others when there is a bear around, especially heading into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Donny and I had just topped one of the major switchbacks on the trail to Pyramid Pass, and were heading deeper into the backcountry when we received a much appreciated trail update from some outfitters heading out. They mentioned a bear along the trail on up, suggesting we keep our eyes open - but "no major problem".

No major problem! The outfitters make their living traveling these trails, equipped with rifle, and atop a set of horses. They passed that casual assessment to a couple of guys on foot, totally unarmed and completely unfamiliar with the ways of bearishness, warily working our way into territory widely known for it's bonafide grizzly bear population. We laughed nervously, speculating about "no major problem" paired with "bear along the trail".

Donny's initial response, given that he grew up in Milwaukee, WI, - terminate the trek into the "Bob". It was time to hastily make our way down the switchbacks to the vehicles and out of harms way. Alas, poor Donny, he was with me. Growing up in the Colorado backcountry, there were no grizzlies, but we had our share of sizeable black bears.

I grew up understanding that the primary response for a bear seeing or hearing a humanoid heading their way, is to vacate the area, distance themselves from intruders. They don't like human company, and prefer to enjoy the great outdoors by themselves. Of course, if surprised, or they have a meal all laid out, or their babies are lingering nearby those rules do vary. But in my 40

some years in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and Montana I had never, ever encountered a bear.

We were headed to Pyramid Pass, the summit marking the Bob Marshall Wilderness boundary, one of the nearer accesses to the "Bob" from Seeley Lake, Montana. An awesome area, with the majestic Pyramid Peak north of the trail. The trail head starts up above Morrell Creek about 10 miles east and north of Seeley Lake. Hiking the trail a couple of times before, I knew we had our work cut out for us. A six mile journey into the backcountry is not bad. The 6 miles back always seemed to get me.

Starting out fairly level, the trail follows the lower ridges for the first mile or so. Heading up some gradual switchbacks it finally covers some steeper, shorter switchbacks. It evens out then for around 3 miles more, leading into the broad canyon above Trail Creek. Crossing giant snowslide chutes, wonderful views open up of Pyramid Peak towering above. Mountain meadows also open up, filled with bear grass, flowers, berry bushes - all perfect areas for that dreaded bear to lurk.

We faced our impending doom boldly, picking up sturdy sticks. Granted, we could not fight off a marauding bear with a stick, but would not go down without a fight. Actually, we whacked the sticks on every nearby tree trunk and rock as we continued. If we made enough noise any bear would conclude a couple of obnoxious city boys were coming, disturbing the peace, and move to some other location. Key to preventing bear encounters - avoid surprising them kicking off a reaction response. So we did our part.

The final leg of the trail to the pass leads into tall, closer timber, along the upper reaches of Trail Creek through a marshier area. The close in brush along the trail seemed like a perfect place for a genuine bear encounter, so the anxiety meter jumped as well. Another group of horseback packers coming out confirmed the bear was just up ahead. Our rustling the brush and whacking the trees and rocks intensified as we anxiously worked our way on up the trail.

The trail crosses the creek, tops a slight rise and circles around an area of downed timber as it leads off up the last couple switchbacks to the pass summit. Topping that slight rise to begin the circle to the left we stopped in our tracks, staring in amazement - the bear sat right in the middle of that area of downed timber we were going to have to circle around.

Actually, the bear lay right in the middle of that area, sprawled out on a large downed tree - and about the size of a large black lab at his biggest! No offense to the bear, but we had built up wild images of the mega-bear of lore

and song over the past couple hours, banging on every rock and tree trunk for miles - scaring away the monster boogey-bear. Talk about a sense of silly sheepishness - blended with a healthy dose of relief.

We continued along the trail circling around the spot where the bear had taken up it's afternoon siesta and the bear didn't budge. It made me wonder if all our racket had been wasted, but it was too funny, and such a monstrous relief to know we weren't in imminent danger. The rest of the trek to the pass seemed so much lighter and easier as we laughed at our raging paranoias. The trail switched up through the brush, crossed a small open face, and finally broke out onto a small lake right before the wilderness boundary and our goal for the day.

It almost goes without saying - a truly wonderful corner of the world is found back up in there. We savored the awesome views back into the Bob Marshall Wilderness as we ate our lunch, then beat feet back out. Our weary bones rejoiced settling into a warm jacuzzi pool upon returning to our accommodations in Missoula at journey's end. Many great choices are available throughout the region for resting your tired bodies through the Montana Adventure site at <http://www.montanaadventure.com/out/state/us-mt.html> - the perfect complement to your explorations throughout this spectacular part of the world!