

Yum! Utah Bear Likes Toothpaste

by Sara Israelsen Deseret Morning News

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PROVO -- Forget the honey. Bears apparently like toothpaste, and Troy Larsgard learned that the hard way.

The 26-year-old Brigham Young University student was camping with his younger brother in Rock Canyon Park two weeks ago when a bear slashed through his tent and pawed at a bag containing toothpaste and other toiletries before taking a swipe at his leg.

On Oct. 21, the brothers hiked almost three miles up a Rock Canyon trail and set up camp. They ate dinner then settled into bed around 9 p.m.

Around 3 a.m., Larsgard woke up when something was pressing against his leg from outside the tent. He sat up and shouted "Hey!" to scare it away. The shadow lumbered off.

He and his brother initially thought it was a cougar and that they had frightened it away. However, the animal came back nearly six hours later and nudged Larsgard's shoulder through the tent. He sat up and saw the bear through the tent's mesh window.

"Fully expecting to see a cougar, I was surprised to finally see a bear," Larsgard said. "That fact alone caught me off guard."

The bear was trying to reach for a bag containing the toothpaste, but couldn't get it through the mesh. After a few tries, Larsgard said the bear simply ripped through the screen window. Seemingly encouraged by the first hole, the bear made a giant swipe and created a large opening, which he climbed through, entering the tent.

The bear sniffed Larsgard's brother -- who was lying motionless in his sleeping bag -- then turned to Larsgard, who had made a small sound as he curled up into a ball in his sleeping bag. Perhaps startled or maybe just curious, the bear swiped at Larsgard's leg. Then, for some reason, the bear seemed to lose interest in the two figures in sleeping bags and backed out of the tent.

"Having a bear at your feet is a lot more comfortable than having a bear at your head," Larsgard said. "Trust me."

As Larsgard tried to get out of his sleeping bag, the swishing of the bag caught the bear's attention and the animal pounced again on the end, trying to pull it out the make-shift door.

Larsgard wriggled loose and got out of the tent through the door. He grabbed a rock and threw it at the bear, which had climbed into a tree about five feet away.

He said he hit the animal in the leg.

The animal dropped down from his perch in the tree and scampered away into the woods. He threw a few more rocks before he and his brother quickly headed back down the trail with more pebbly ammunition in hand.

The two got in their car at the trailhead and went to the BYU Health Center, where Larsgard told the story and showed skeptical employees his clawlike puncture wound and 3 1/2-inch scrape mark.

As a precaution, he got a tetanus shot and antibiotics for 10 days. His left thigh was also bruised and hurt to walk on for a while, he said.

"I'll be a little more careful," Larsgard said about future outings. Although he had tied their food up properly, he didn't really think about the toothpaste. "It was a 14-hour excursion that turned into a lot more than we bargained for."

As with any sighting or attack, the Forest Service notifies the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, which posts notices near a campground or area where the bear was seen to let people know about the sighting

"We're going to follow up, and we will have someone from our Pleasant Grove office go and take a look," said Forest Service spokeswoman Loyal Clark. "If it looks like we do have a lot of activity in there, or if this bear seems to be frequenting this area, we'll get some signs posted."

If the bear is losing its fear of humans, it will need to be moved, she said.

The animal would have been a black bear, the only kind in the state. But with a population of almost 3,000 in Utah, the Division of Wildlife Resources encourages anyone in the woods to be careful.

"The biggest thing for people to keep in mind is to keep their campsite or their summer home area clean," said Mark Hadley, DWR spokesman. "That's the number one thing you can do to prevent having a bear get close to you."

Food, garbage, toothpaste and even cologne are all scents that could attract a large clawed mammal. And if the animal finds a treat, he'll be more likely to return.

"If they start to lose their natural fear of people," Hadley said "that's when lots of problems occur."