Fairbanks outdoorsman shares his bear safety expertise

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FAIRBANKS — “When you’re walking down a beach to get to a hot springs and the
beach is only this wide and there is a brown bear on the beach feeding on the grass, you have to go past. You have to make him move,” Joe Nava explained in his calm, no-nonsense manner. “I’ve had bears in my camp tearing up my tent and I’ve had to chase them out, which is not smart or easy. But if you’re going to save the tent you’re living in, you have to force the bears to move.”

But before anyone gets the idea that Nava is a Crocodile Hunter-type for the northern wilds, a thrill seeker in search of dangerous animal encounters just because he can usually get away with it, he isn’t. He’s just the opposite, in fact. For the past 40 years Nava, a retired University of Alaska researcher and project coordinator, former Alaska Range hunting guide and Alaska Department of Fish & Game biologist, has taught a Fairbanks-based bear and gun safety course. The course, simply called Bear Safety, stresses bear avoidance techniques in a state where the Alaska Department of Fish & Game estimates total bear populations hover around 90,000.

Spending time in Alaska’s outdoors, “you learn a lot about bear behavior,” during such encounters, Nava added, but counsels his students to go the other way and never take a chance.

Nava’s knowledge of bears and how they behave, coupled with his National Rifle Association certification as a firearms instructor, led him to the classroom in 1967 at the request of the Institute of Arctic Biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where Nava was a research coordinator.

“They knew I had some firearms knowledge and some bear knowledge. I’d had plenty of bear encounters,” Nava, now 77, recalled. “So, they asked me if I would teach
people something about bears before they went out into the field.”

The class began as a safety measure for UAF biology researchers. Eventually, other departments at the university and outside agencies such as the National Park Service began sending people to Nava for training. Finally, he opened the class up to everyone. Nava estimates he’s taught about 10,000 people bear safety techniques, “but I don’t keep good track of those things.

“I had the skill and knowledge to do it, so I started to provide that service. I’ve expanded to include the whole community,” he said. “I don’t want anyone to get mauled by a bear.

“I see a tremendous benefit to our people going out into the field,” he said

Jami Warrick, an Institute of Arctic Biology safety officer who schedules participants for Nava’s class, said she considers the training a “tremendous benefit” for researchers heading into the field. She estimated 30-40 people from the lab, including herself, have taken the class over the past two years.

“I can’t say that there has been one time anyone has had anything less than positive to say about his course. I really learned a lot about bears,” she said.

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game notes that only 20 people have died from bear attacks in the past 85 years. Despite this statistic, bears are capable of being almost anywhere at anytime, Nava said, and should always be treated with respect.

Initially, his knowledge was based almost completely on personal experiences and
any media — books or videos — he could find. However, as people came forward with their stories about being mauled or other bear encounters Nava carefully listened to the details, assessed what happened, and used the additional perspectives to further define his instruction.

The stories used in class are all firsthand, he added.

“I talk to the person who (had the encounter), otherwise you never know how the story gets mixed,” he said.

**Avoiding a bear**

Nava’s class is serious — “bears are a serious thing” — but his class is peppered with “bearisms” that may incur a chuckle, such as stringing up bottles of bear spray around his cabin to protect it from curious bears — who “want to taste everything.”

His comfortable personality immediately puts students at ease. Nava doesn’t just stand at the front of the room and lecture; his method is to engage the student, start from their own bear experiences, then share his knowledge through colorful stories that provide additional insight and understanding of bears.

“I didn’t know what to expect going in to the class, (but) his relaxed attitude and approach helped me to focus more,” Warrick said. “Bears intimidate me, but now I know more what to expect when I go out into the wilderness.”

Most bear attacks, Nava explained, occur because people make three basic mistakes: Surprising a bear, running from a bear or feeding a bear. Of the three, surprising the bear causes most of the encounters.
“The most common comment made by people who have been mauled is this: ‘I usually make noise, but I wasn’t making any noise at the time,’” Nava said. “That means they were walking in silence and surprised a bear and it had to take some defensive action.”

While it’s always exciting to see a bear, Nava stresses taking simple precautions as the best way to prevent bear encounters. Usually, bears aren’t interested in having an encounter with humans either. If they sense your presence, they often run the other way, Nava said.

Nava begins each class by discussing the bear’s senses and how using them to your advantage contributes toward navigating safely through bear country.

A bear’s strongest sense is his nose, and if a bear smells you, he typically runs off, Nava said. Thus, it’s advantageous to walk with the wind at your back. Obviously, that isn’t always practical, so taking advantage of a bear’s second strongest sense—hearing—is critical. The chances of startling a bear decrease if they hear you coming. Nava recommends loud bells—“and not those little ones made for tourist” he said — whistles, slapping the brush, singing (poorly or well) and talking loudly to alert bears to your presence.

Other important aspects of avoidance include using our own senses to know when a bear might be present and when it’s time to find an alternate route. Bears that sense danger (aka humans) might chuff, bark or snort, thrash bushes and make other noises to signal a warning. The smells of rotting meat, or carrion-feeding birds circling above, can also indicate bears are nearby. And, of course, “If you can smell a bear,
you are too close,” Nava said.

“\nIn each of these cases, it’s best to stop, back away and leave the area. Do not investigate,” he said. “You may never see a bear, but you avoid confrontation.”

### Meeting a bear

So none of this has worked and you now encounter a bear. Nava also discusses what to do at this point. He counsels preparation: first with knowledge, and then to have either a gun or “if you’re not going to carry a gun, at least carry pepper spray,” he said. When you do see a bear, first “get big.” Hold your hands high to look larger — “bears respect size,” Nava explained — while talking to the bear in a calm, steady voice. Slowly back away, but always face the bear. Most likely the bear will let you leave or may leave itself. But never run from a bear, Nava cautioned.

“If you turn and run from a bear, you are sending a message that you are prey,” Nava said. “Hold your ground. It will eliminate the chase response.”

So, while standing down a charging bear may later require a clothing change, it offers a strong chance of avoiding a potentially more dangerous encounter — a mauling.

Yet, sometimes the bear doesn’t leave. Then a line must be drawn that a bear shouldn’t cross. Nava considers 20 feet close enough.

“Usually the bear will stop and turn by the 20-foot line. If he crosses the 20-foot line, he’s usually going all the way. That’s been my experience,” Nava said. “But you’ve got to be charged by a few bears and talk to a lot of people before you decide where to
And at 20 feet is where the deterrent—pepper spray or gun—can be used.

“But what I teach is that you don’t want to shoot the bear because he’s probably going to turn and go the other way,” he added. “I try to teach people not to shoot the bear, avoid the bear. The skills of bear avoidance are more important than knowing how to shoot or pepper spray the bear.”

The second portion of Nava’s class involves basic shotgun training, which includes range firing at a bear target placed 20 feet away. After a couple of practice shots, Nava then draws the target forward at a speed meant to mimic an oncoming bear. The shooter has three shots to “take down” the bear.

“I was really nervous about firing a gun,” Warrick said. “The relaxed atmosphere (of the class) helped before I went to the shooting range. I was much more comfortable than I thought I would be.”

Nava said proximity often boosts the effectiveness of firearm protection.

“If the bear’s within 20 feet, you almost can’t miss if you’re shooting at him,” Nava said.

Still Nava, who hosts “Joe Nava’s Shooters Corner” Thursday’s from 11 a.m.-noon on KFAR 660 AM, places high emphasis on gun training and encourages anyone who might carry a gun into bear country to practice with the weapon.

“It’s not so much teaching the person how to accurately and carefully shoot the...
animal, it’s gun safety,” he said. “Because if you’re going to carry a gun in bear country you don’t want to be more of a hazard than the bear is. There are more people accidentally shot in Alaska each year than are mauled by bears.”

**Bears around Fairbanks**

While Nava said bear sightings around Fairbanks are not as common as areas further south, like Anchorage, they do happen as the human population, and bear population, swell.

“That’s why we’re having so many bear problems at the edges of communities,” he said. “Today it’s even more important to be bear savvy.”

For this reason, Nava and his family carry bear spray when jogging or walking local trails — like those on the UAF campus — and he recommends it to anyone spending time outdoors. Bear spray comes in a variety of sizes.

“I gave pepper spray to all my daughters when they started jogging the trails around here,” he added.

Despite his numerous bear encounters and the possibly endless stories he could tell, Nava remains modest about the service he provides his community.

“I don’t know everything there is about bears, but I know enough to help people. I got an e-mail from a lady who claimed I saved her life. Others have thanked me. That’s very rewarding, but I’ve never yet had a student come back and say I was killed and eaten by a bear,” he said, cracking a slight smile. “But I never learned of
any student that I taught being mauled either."