

Bears, Bullies and Boogeymen

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"...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself..." - Franklin D. Roosevelt

We are into the hiking season (finally) and with the warm weather, the urge to get outside into fragrant nature hits the urbanite family hard. Thousands of weekend warriors flood the mountain parks, dragging their overloaded trailers into crowded campgrounds. Children, dogs, bikes, toys and coolers spew from the trailer doors, and the valleys are full of the sounds of buzzing traffic, barking dogs and human voices.

Living only an hour or so away from mountain parks, each summer I witness this transformation from tranquil ecosystem to overloaded environment. Needless to say, I usually avoid the parks during July and August because they are chokingly busy. The downside of this, as I recently discovered when looking back over images taken in the last couple of years, is a dramatic lack of green landscapes in my collection.

As a photographer, this just won't do! When the long winter months close down on us, we want to be looking at blue-sky, summer scenics to get us through. There is only one problem: unlike President Roosevelt, I keep getting distracted by the source of my fears. A nasty encounter with a bear is one nightmare, for example, or choosing the trail that has the axe-murderer lurking behind the next bend. In daylight at my computer, these fears seem silly and trivial. In the woods hiking alone...well, that is when knowing the fears are disproportionate or irrationality does not alleviate the tension I feel.

I have, over the years, attempted to overcome my fears. This past winter, I ventured out alone one Sunday into a world of fresh, soft wet snow to take pictures. That day, the weather was still coming in; the snow seemed to be the air rather than fall through it. The whole world was an unrelenting white. The night before, a stinging rain had fallen, turning the pavement around our house into the wet, cold skin of a breaching whale. Overnight, though, the rain turned to fat flakes of sleet. I knew when I set out that Sunday morning that driving conditions were less than ideal. In fact, in my little Corolla with all-season tires, it was a questionable decision to head out at all.

My natural inclination is to avoid roads in such soft, slippery conditions, but I decided photographers were obviously made of sterner stuff, climbing cliffs, hanging out of planes, hiking miles in driving sleet. And don't we as a society admire their tenacity and willingness to push limits? I resolved not to miss out on opportunities from overly cautious evaluations of my chances in the snow. I had to be out too—especially because conditions for photography (if not driving) were perfect! I determined that I was being a silly, scared person and that a truly passionate photographer would have set out without this evaluation in his or her head first.

Of course, I got stuck within minutes of stopping to take my first picture.

The asphalt was so slick underneath my car's tires that the slightest pressure on the tires resulted in lateral rather than forward movements. Little did I know, but as soon as I stopped on the side of the road, I was doomed. Perhaps other more seasoned drivers would know my vehicle could not handle those conditions, but I did not because usually I stay home! I am not ashamed to say that in the end a nice hunter towed my car away from the side of the road.



But the point of this embarrassing story is the thought process I went through before I set out. This is the same process I go through before I ever head out to shoot on my own: not only do I think about where I'm going and what I'm going to take pictures of, but I also run through a mental checklist of potential dangers I may encounter on the way. How many people are likely to hike this trail? Will it be dark for any part of my trip? Do I have a cell phone? Have I notified someone of where I am going and when I plan to be back? I evaluate my risk of running into bears and rapists with about the same amount of gravitas. And sometimes I decide the place I wish to go is just too risky to go alone.



I do not think I am the only person who habitually thinks about safety from both the four- and two-legged variety of animal; we are bombarded with horrific stories of abduction, rape and murder and the sensationalism of the reporting eradicates any sense of proportion in the audience. I tell myself all the time that I am far more likely statistically to die in a car accident on the way to the trailhead! Even men aren't so safe anymore it seems, although I would be surprised if many have that extra sense out for the campground bully or the boogeymen in the woods when hiking alone.

Part of this cautiousness is good risk evaluation: most people would agree that women are more likely to be accosted than men. But the problem arises when fears of possible dangers are out of proportion to the possibility of such things happening causing a person never to leave home. The trick is to do a healthy evaluation of the dangers, make your decision, and head out if it is within your "safe zone." Here, knowledge is power. Read up on bears and learn something about their behaviours. Carry bear spray and know how to use it. Study the trail map and be prepared for your hike by bringing a compass (that you can use!), emergency supplies and appropriate clothing. Many people gain confidence by taking a self-defense course or studying a martial art.

And in the end, if you just feel better hiking with a pal, I think that is ok too. The main danger is when you stay home because of your fears and miss out on amazing photographic opportunities. As for me, the creativity and joy I feel when I'm out in nature on my own is powerful enough that I will put up with the crowds and risk an encounter with a boogeyman to come home with some images of our beautiful summers in the mountain parks.

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Samantha Chrysanthou was born in Lethbridge, Alberta. After moving for a period of time to northern Alberta, she returned in 2000 to southern Alberta to pursue a law degree in Calgary. After becoming a lawyer, Samantha began to realize her heart was more engaged in capturing the beauty of the landscape around her than debating the nuances of legal arguments in court. She has since left law to pursue writing and photography full-time. She particularly enjoys shooting the prairies, foothills and Rocky Mountains within an hour or so of her home in Cochrane, Alberta. Visit Samantha's website to view more of her work at www.chrysalizz.smugmug.com.

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