

# One man's story about surviving a bear attack

By Dave Garshelis, Outdoor

Fatal black bear attacks on people are extremely rare. There are 700,000 to 900,000 black bears living in North America, and in recent years, they've killed an average of two people a year. And despite popular perception, most black bears that kill people aren't mothers protecting their cubs, but adult males hunting in stealth. A 2011 study of bear deaths from 1900 to 2009 showed that male bears committed 92 percent of the attacks. More than 80 percent of those attacks were predatory – in other words, a bear trying to make a human into a meal. Joe Azougar almost became one of these deaths when a 316-pound male black bear locked onto him as prey at his cabin in Ontario. This is his story.

*On the Saturday before Mother's Day, I went out to my porch around 9:45am to watch geese fly away from a nearby field. I sat in a chair about 10 feet from my door, drinking a cup of coffee with one hand and petting my German shepherd, Ace, with the other. My brother had given me the 6-month-old dog a few days before. We immediately bonded. He was so intelligent. I could tell him to sit and go inside my house for a half hour, and he would stay in the same place.*

*Around 10am, I heard this vibration, this thunder, nearby. I thought it was one of my animals. I turned to my right and there was a black bear running at me, drooling.*

*Ace jumped up in the air a few feet in front of me. The animals flew into this ball of howling and biting. I frantically ran inside the house and locked the door. The dog just kept pushing the bear away from the door. He knew he was protecting me.*

A physical shock took over my body and my mind. I couldn't remember the emergency number, so I called my friend, who called 911. I called another neighbor to see if he could come help, but had to leave a message. I called his daughter and said, "Be safe, there's a bear out there that's big." After about a minute, I looked outside my main window and saw the bear dragging the lifeless body of Ace into the bushes.

A minute later, the bear ran straight to the back window and smashed it with one swing. I tried making myself bigger. I banged pots and pans to scare him off. It did nothing. The bear had determination on his face.

The back window is roughly 5 feet off the ground and small, a couple feet by a couple feet. The bear growled and put his head through the window frame, then his paws, then his whole body in a big round ball of fur. Steam drifted out of his mouth. I was 3 feet away from his face.

My cabin is small, 8 feet wide by 16 feet long. With my furniture and desk, it's more like 5 by 5 feet. I imagined him ripping me up inside my house. I thought, There's no way I'll make it in here.

I decided to make a run for the road, which was roughly 50 feet or so away. I thought I might have a chance there because the neighbors might show or the cops might come with guns. When I turned around, he was running after me in a straight line.

I made it to the road, but nobody was there. He ran in a circle around me, came at my right side, and threw one powerful shot to my right shoulder with his paw. I'm a big boy, 5-feet-11-inches and 240 pounds, but I landed in the ditch. All I remember is my face hitting the dirt.

He jumped on my back and started scalping me with his front teeth. I can't describe that pain. At first, I wanted him to sink his canines in for a quick death, but then I screamed,

*"God protect me." I asked God not to have my family find me on Mother's Day in pieces in the bushes.*

*The bear ripped my skin to the back of my skull. My entire scalp just came off. Then he turned his mouth sideways and started chipping into my skull. I heard his teeth clicking into the bone. I saw pieces of flesh falling.*

*I felt his head go back. I turned to look and he was licking his teeth. I jammed my thumb into his eye, which gave me a couple of seconds to feel for the flesh of my head with my other hand. It felt so soft, I thought it was my brain. I pulled it back over my head and pressed down hard.*

*I covered my head like a bomb might drop from the sky, which exposed my shoulder. He just started ripping at my shoulder. I tried to reach back with my other hand and grab his face, but you can't really fight a beast like that. It was like I was tickling him.*

*The main thing was, I didn't want the bear to turn me over. I knew one bite into my organs—liver, heart, kidneys—and I would have been gone. The bear ripped my trapezius muscles. He tore my shirt off and clawed at the sides of my torso. When he started biting my side, I grabbed some dirt and rocks and threw them at him. He didn't stop. He just kept biting and pulling.*

*He started to drag me out of the ditch and towards some bushes. That's when I thought it was all over. I am going to be bear meat. While he was dragging me, my senses changed. I noticed white snowflakes falling. Everything became silent. Everything seemed so calm. I stopped fighting.*

*At some point, I turned my head and saw tires. I looked up and saw two angels. I think they were in a silver van. One of them was honking the horn, but I couldn't hear it. The bear ran away. One woman covered her mouth in shock, like, "Oh my God." They were talking, but all I heard was me saying, "Please,*

*help me. Please, help me."*

*I later found out that every year for Mother's Day, they camp near my property. That morning, they had gone out to get Coke. When they drove back, they thought they saw a bear eating garbage – its head going in and out of trash. Since they were staying nearby, they pulled up for a closer look.*

*When the bear ran away, they quickly threw me in the back and drove off. One woman held my hand. She kept talking.*

*"You're going to be OK."*

*I kept asking for water. I've never felt such thirst, like I was in the Sahara desert. I didn't care about the pain, just this thirst. It drove me mental.*

*"We're getting close. There are the cops."*

*I would have been dead by the time the cops got there.*

*At the hospital, the doctor put his hand on my chest. I asked for something for the pain, then started cursing and screaming. He kept saying, "You're going to be OK. There's nothing wrong with your brain. You're going to go in the operating room. You're going to be fine."*

*Next thing I know, I hear, "Take him into X-ray." Then I went unconscious.*

*When I woke, the nurse went step-by-step over the injuries. They put in over 300 stitches. The staff said I was a very lucky man, that when accidents like this happen, usually the last word used is funeral.*

### **Expert analysis:**

It is not clear whether the large male bear that attacked Joe had initially been attracted to the area by some other food source, like garbage, but it is clear that this attack was of

predatory intent. Predatory attacks by black bears are extremely rare, given the number of times people and bears encounter each other. The usual recommendation of slowly walking away, or “playing dead” if a bear actually knocks you down, is effective when a bear views you as a threat, but it does not apply for a bear that has a mindset to eat you.

In an attack like this, a person should try to fight back with anything available, or kill the bear if possible. Maybe Joe would have fared better had he grabbed a large knife from his cabin, but his decision to immediately flee was justified to the extent that he had no way of knowing whether the bear would come after him, or would stay and snack on food inside the cabin. He certainly would have been killed and consumed had the bear not been scared off by the vehicle.

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