

This Is Not A Drill!

The Day We Earned Our Adult Beverages!!

This morning we arrived for duty Sunday at String Lake at 8am. The smoke had drifted out of the valley, so the mountains were looking more perky and inviting than they had in a few days. Already, the first two parking lots were full! With the forecast for the temperatures to reach the lower 90's, this could be a rough day in the sun answering hiking questions.

Our gracious boss had a surprise waiting in our inboxes – cooling towels that feel cold as water evaporates from the fabric meant to stay wet for a long time. I can tell you it was a blessing come 2:30!

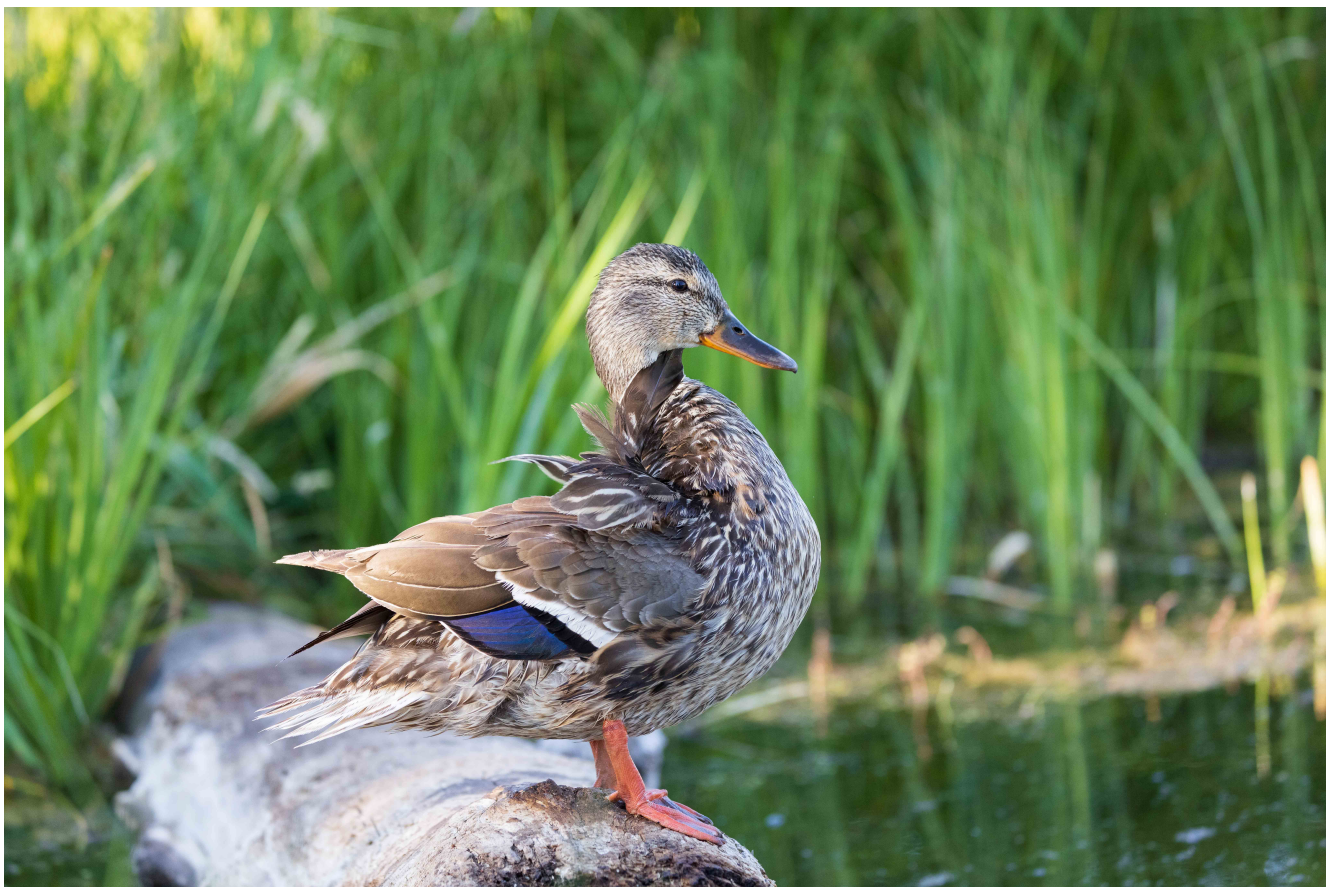
Dave and I began the morning as usual before our shift starts by walking the shore line picking up trash along the beach spots and forgotten in bear boxes. We often find Lost & Found items of clothing and recreation equipment. It also gives us the chance to chat with people about the food rules as they are setting up for the day.

We ran into a young family setting up, watching their toddlers splash and play in the lake. Mom looked at me and asked if I was the one taking pictures yesterday at Schwabacher. I was thinking that she looked familiar, and the question instantly let me place why. Yes! We'd met briefly when she offered to text me a picture of me photographing a mallard female yesterday!



Mallard Momma posing for me at Schwabacher's Landing
I had been kneeling on the edge of the beaver pond to get a lower angle to photograph a family of mallards as they swam toward me. Mom broke off from her chicks (now, nearly her size!) and hopped up on a log in the water about ten feet away. I swear the duck Vogue'd for me! It turns out my good samaritan had my phone number incorrect, so she just Air-Dropped it to Dave's phone as we stood on the trail. Unfortunately, now I don't have her contact info to send a reply and a thank you picture from the little photo session. Rats! But still, what a really fun encounter!!







The morning unrolled as usual. I stood post at the main map answering what is the best hike questions. Dave dealt with the Full Parking Lot sign (9am!) and some traffic control. Lakers arrive in staggered shifts to cover 12 hours at the lake. As Lakers arrived we switched up chores, Dave took a long turn at the greeting line to help guide visitors to other recreation options in the park. I walked the waterfront to check on things and bring food safety education to folks that had arrived since our first pass.

We've discovered three general reactions to our greeting folks with food safety information: a) startled that bears may visit and yes, the bear boxes are there for them to use, glad to have the information b) heard something about keeping food from bears but not exactly sure why, and c) they know better than us and don't really need to do anything we ask. Eye rolls, crossed arms, 'yeah, yeah, we know, and getting on their paddle board to leave the food right at our feet. How does that saying go? – you can lead a horse to water?! Fortunately, the first two reactions are much more common than

the last!

That cycle with a trip through the parking lot took me past lunch time. Heading to the truck to get my sandwich, I see a woman in a giant SUV parked sideways across two handicapped spots. *sigh* She had just hugged someone goodbye, so I was going to let it go, assuming she was about to leave, but she called out to me "I am not parking here!" I had to get closer to hear the rest of what she was saying. She wants to know what I would do if she didn't leave. I said I would talk to her about illegally parking, and if she pushed back I would ask a Law Enforcement Officer to come and speak with her. Her reply was a long list of some volunteer work she did designing something or other for the National Parks. So if she is so smart, and important, and generous to volunteer, why is she parking her car across two handicapped spots? My answer, nice to meet you. Time for my lunch and time for you to mmm__have a nice day!

Lunch in hand, with all picnic tables full, I find a patch of shade in the lee of the trailer. I had just plopped down when Lydia, the Ranger on duty with us pops off the trail and says, "We've got a bear at the Jenny Lake bridge, heading this way!"

All hands on deck!

Photo by Jackson, a Laker: the beginnings of working with the BB+2 (black bear plus 2 cubs)

We have two new Lakers in training this week, so I grab Rush and we head for the picnic area on our way down to the trail heading south. We start clearing folks out.

"Hello everyone! We have a bear with cubs on the trail heading in this area. We need you to pick up your food, water bottles, sun lotion and put it in that bear box right over there, and then move out into the parking lot. When it is safe to come back, we'll let you know. Thank You!" "No, you don't need to bring your beach towels, kayak, hammock, ... etc. Just make sure

there is no food left behind and go. Thank you.”

Next table. Next picnicker, work south.

Dave has become the on-scene commander. He has notified Dispatch that we have a bear in a developed area, and that we request the assistance of any available Wildlife Brigade units. He and the first Laker to spot the bear now work their way up the trail to get eyes on. Dave begins calling out on our radio channel the bears location and what she and her cubs are doing. It turns out, this is a bear that lives generally in the Jenny Lake area, the lake to our south, and has quite a reputation with Wildlife Brigade. This is pretty far north for her.

Video by Jenny, a Laker: you can see why managing the safety of people on land and in the water at the same time is a challenge

The Lakers have their own terms for locations around the lake and trails. Dave is calling that she has moved to Bear Box Seven, [we started at BB1] twenty yards east of the trail and moving north. So very helpful, because as Rush and I are clearing picnickers off the lakeshore we know just how close she is to the people we are directing and just how close we are getting to being in her path.

From working the greeting line up on the road, Dave has his neon yellow safety vest on still – which makes him easy to spot in the dense brush. WLBrigade arrives and Dave talks them in to our location – bear box seven doesn’t mean much to them.



Photo by Jackson, a Laker: Dave, bear spray out of the holster radioing the position and activity of our bear

Soon, Rush and I have cleared about half of the half-mile long lake front when we come upon Dave and another Laker working the bear. I can just make out a cinnamon lump ambling over downed logs. Then I catch sight of her two cubs, one black, one cinnamon. Laker Jenny has eyes on one of the cubs in the brush. We are close. So I back up. In doing so, I have a different angle on the tree branches and catch the motion of mother bear loping north. I tap Jenny on the shoulder and tell her it is moving, and she radios the update.



Photo by Jackson, a Laker: the cubs find someone's beach spot
Sometimes the mother bear stops to investigate a rotted log. I could hear a big crunch when she used one paw to rip open a 12+ inch downed tree to get at the bugs inside. So cute to see the cubs rush in to copy her! Dave later saw her roll a massive downed tree like it was a piece of foam with just a swipe of her paw!



Photo by Bill, a Laker: Mom and one of the cubs on the trail – you can see why we are nervous of losing sight of her in the brush

As we watch her with the cubs, we are all thinking about the general direction she is moving in, what people are there, are they in a safe place, and is there anything we need to do. More than just maintaining situational awareness, we are gently putting pressure on the bear to not linger in a developed area, to continue on in the direction that she wanted to go initially. It is a subtle balance to encourage the bear to keep moving, but not so much to stress her out. This particular bear does not like this process. At one point she bluff charged Dave. Later she also bluff charged another Laker, a ranger, and one of the Wildlife Brigade members. Our bear spray was out of the holster!

Still slowly moving north, she is near a bridge we have over a marshy area. She moves further inland from the trail and starts ripping into another rotted log. Her black cub decides

to climb one of the massive pine trees nearby. We are all astonished by how high it climbs, more than three quarters of the tree's full height.

At this point I notice people coming up the trail from the south. While the bear and cubs were busy, I quickly and quietly moved past them on the trail and convinced the onlookers that this was not a safe 'bear viewing opportunity' and it would be safest and most helpful to us if they please moved back to the parking lot. I walked more of the trail and found visitors that thought they had hit the jackpot with an empty beach, setting up their picnics. We got that sorted out.

String Lake attracts a massive amount of kayakers, paddle boarders, and folks with inflatable rafts, more than any other lake in the Park. Now we had people out on the lake, paddling to shore where we had cleared in advance of the bear, or coming close to shore in hopes of seeing what was happening. Hard to blame folks wanting to see, but it complicated our efforts immensely.

As I started making my way back north, the bear turned south. She is coming my way again. Luckily, she is on the trail itself and therefore easy to see. She has gone out of view of some Lakers, but I can still see her, as she takes the cubs to the water side of the trail. We think she may try and swim across here. So I cut through so brush to get to the shore and a view of the small peninsula she come out on.

My heart stopped. At the waters edge there is a woman in a life vest, sitting on the shore, with her back to the trees ... the very direction the bear could come from. I can't get to her, and it is too far to yell. So I radio Dave as coordinator what I see and the potential for trouble.

Meanwhile more paddle boarders are heading for the same area. Myself and other Lakers are hollering from shore and waving

our arms to get their attention – largely an exercise in frustration. We want them to stay right where they are. In this chaos, the woman finally figures out something is up and starts wading across the lake. Not a great option, but probably her best option at this point. We are still not sure how she ended up there.

The bears did indeed make it to the water. Dave was able to get eyes on them again. Mom did want to swim across. We don't know if the flotilla of watercraft in that area deterred her or not. From his observations, Dave thinks they did not cross because the cubs were scared. They did not just line up behind mom to swim, they looked like they were trying to climb on her back. This behavior is consistent with previous observations of the cubs' lack of interest in swimming anything more than a stream, and even that was under protest.

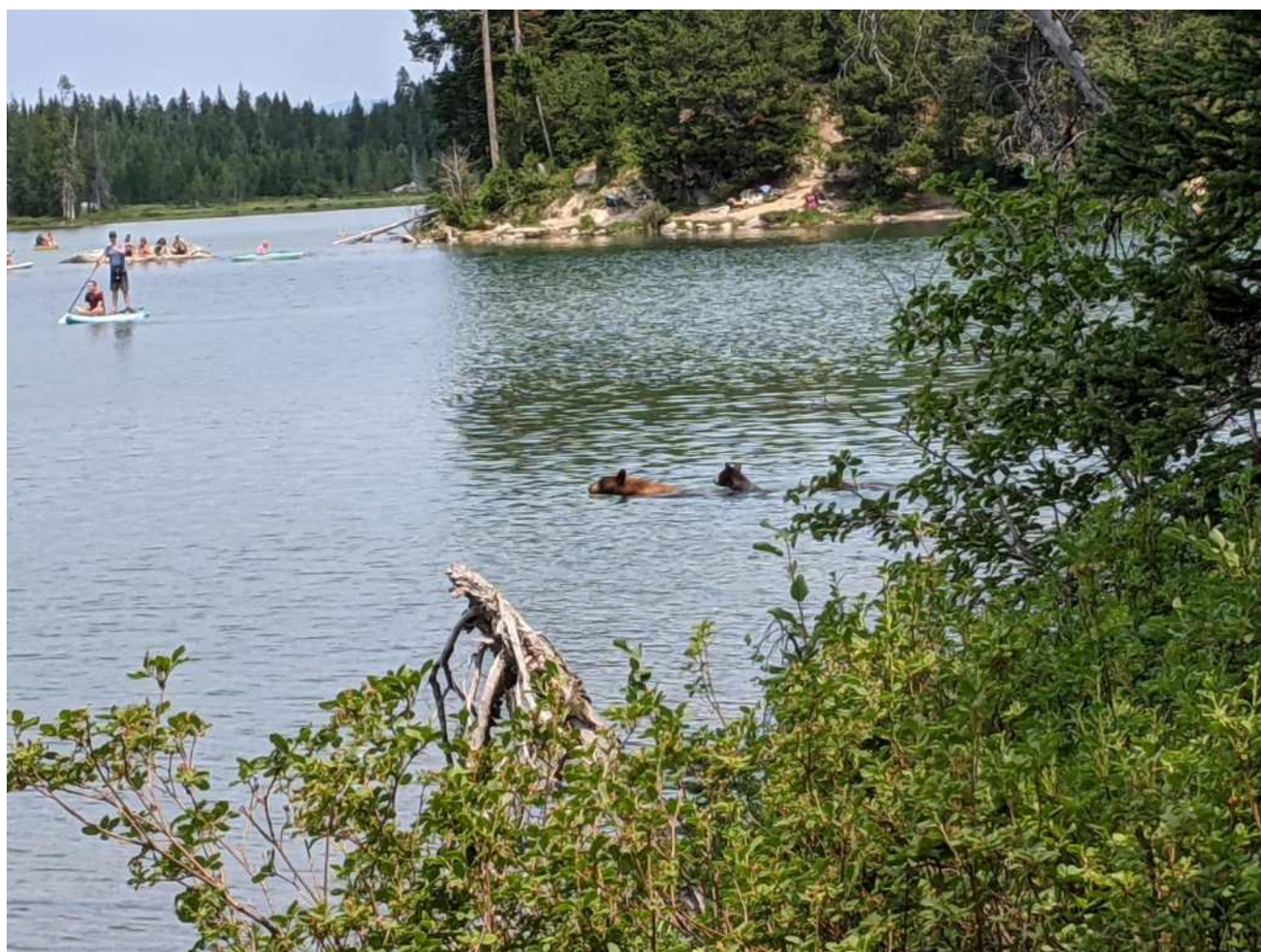


Photo by Jackson, a Laker: the first attempt at swimming to the west side of the lake



Photo by Bill, a Laker: the cubs try to hitch a ride, but Mom turns back to shore

Now the bear turns back north. I was shadowing some of the Brigade folks in case they needed or wanted help (and to learn by watching). We realize she is now headed for the picnic area and the north shoreline. I told Dave on radio that I would take care of it, and cut through the brush to get ahead of the bear again and start clearing people off the last half of the beach.

“Hi, It’s me, your favorite ranger back again! I hope you remember the food plan for when a bear comes we talked about this morning because you need to implement it now! This is not a drill, or me being funny. We really do have a bear on the trail coming in this direction.etc.”

To my astonishment, I got push back!

One couple stared at me and said their kids were out on the

lake and they were not leaving them. Part of me is thinking what age are these kids that you trust to paddle away by themselves, but you want to wait in front of a bear to have them come to shore. I tried to argue, got no where and had a lot more beach to clear.

I no kidding had to reassure people that their beach towels and blow up crocodile would be there when they got back. They just had to take their food and go – please. Now! Please.

The last bunch were people sitting out on a rock in the middle of the narrowest channel of the lake. I had talked to them several times already today about their abandoned back packs and coolers on shore. “No food, no food!,” they claimed. They wanted to stay on their rock and watch, but I did get them to start wading to shore to pick up their stuff spread out all over the place.

As I came up the ravine from the water, I saw Ranger Lydia coming up the trail, passing bear box 11 and saying, “They are right here!,” pointing over her shoulder. The look on her face was serious and focused, I thought, uh-oh, I still have people to get out of here – what is taking so darn long?! Even a Brigade member is trying to get them to move and they are giving her a hard time.

She also points to other stragglers that I had talked to today down by the water. By now, I am done being nice, and I am done trying to be firm. I used my best Mad-Mom voice and said, “OK folks, you need to move, and you need to move now!” I just didn’t have time to kindly convince them.

Lydia heads for the trail to the parking lot to start shooing people lingering on the trail to move. I go back to goose the slow moving people from the rock when all of a sudden the bear and cubs starts running up the trail and into the trees where Lydia has just gone, right across from where I am standing!

Now I am standing at the head of the ravine to stop the people

from coming up and walking into the running bear. Oy!

Then it moves north again, running up a short hill to the top of log stairs that marks the beginning of the official back country, where we normally let bears be bears.

Dave and others follow in case she changes her mind and turns around. She is known to reverse course, and has done it a few times today. My stragglers are still hanging around, and it takes five tries to get them to clear the area until we are sure it is safe. A little further down the shore, other people have snuck back in and already breaking out their picnics and swimming. I got more push back when I asked them to at least keep their food close in case the bear came back and we needed them to move again. She wasn't all that far up the trail, and being a Jenny Lake bear, she was going to want to head south again, and we would not know when or on what path.



my glimpse of the cubs leaving the trail and heading into the

bushes

Twenty to thirty minutes later Dave was able to confirm that she had indeed gotten her cubs to swim the narrowest part of the lake – within five feet of the rock where the stragglers had been – and incidentally left a drink can behind! So much for their bragging that they are local and know aaaaalllll about bears!

After the bears made it across the lake safely, we started letting people back on the lake shore. We found lots of very excited people, grateful people, and yes, a few annoyed people. But we were sure to thank all of them for cooperating. We also heard, “Does that happen often?” “How do you deal with all those people?” “I couldn’t do what you do!”

At various points in the afternoon I was stopped by visitors that said thank you for keeping them safe, and that they were very impressed by how we seem to know exactly where the bear was and what to do. I am sure the other Lakers had the same experience. I certainly hope they did!

Around four in the afternoon, as the shift was ending for several of us, we gathered at the trailer to talk about how working with the bear had gone. What we thought worked well and we should do again. What we struggled with and what we might do to counter that next time. The hardest part was trying to work with the people out on the water. But over all, it was very successful. No one got hurt, the bears moved through a developed area and did not get a food reward.

The last time I came home from work this exhausted, I’d spent the day in the back of a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle with soldiers in the dunes of Yuma Arizona testing software. Cold ciders all around!