

What the Bear Did in the Woods

By Bob Goddard

Horses make sense without even trying. I like that in a mammal. Sure, they sometimes behave in ways that mystify humans. I've heard of horses being obsessed with things like video cameras or terrified of rocks on the ground. That's pretty weird. But I've also noticed that much of a horse's mystifying behavior is a reflection of equally mystifying human behavior. If we act nuts, so will they.

Since horses are genetically wired to sense danger all around them (even when there is none) it is up to us to be the calm, sophisticated ones. As humans, it is our job to bring a composed assertiveness to any stressful situation. When we fail, it gives the horse *two* things to worry about.

I mention all of this because of an episode my daughter, Jamie, and her high-strung Thoroughbred, Chilli, became involved in not too long ago. Actually, they *created* the episode.

It all started when the pair went on a nice, relaxing trail ride in the woods near their boarding barn. After a pleasant jog, they came across a large tree with some curious marks on its trunk. On closer examination, Jamie concluded that the marks were definitely the work of some creature. They were - beyond doubt - claw marks. Huge claw marks. Huge claw marks made by an animal large enough to eat a horse - and therefore large enough to eat a human.

Scary.

What really disturbed Jamie was Chilli's reaction. The moment they came upon the tree with huge claw marks, Jamie could feel him tense up. He raised his head and snorted. She could barely control him on the trip back to the barn.

When Jamie finally got back to safety, she shared her discovery with Missy, another boarder. The girl seemed concerned.

"You know, I heard that George hunts bears out there...."

George was the owner of the barn.

"Are you sure?" Jamie asked. "Bears?"

"I'm pretty sure. I don't think he ever got one though."

The evidence was beginning to mount.



When Jamie returned to the barn the next day, other boarders were excited and curious about the bear she had seen:

"How close was the bear?"

"Did Chilli rear?"

"Did the bear see you?"

"How big was he?"

Jamie tried to explain. "There were just claw marks..."

"There's a bear out there all right," one of the boarders insisted.

"That's for sure," another chimed in. "You can tell by the way the horses are acting. Tori was pacing in the paddock all morning and George had to bring her in. I could barely even get a saddle on Casey."

"Yeah, Giff keeps kicking his water bucket off the wall," a third added. "And Duke has diarrhea."

The thing about bear attacks is that they come when you least expect it. But with the horses' help, these humans were on alert. Nobody in this group was going to be taken by surprise.

On the following day, Jamie found a sign posted on the tack room door:

NO ONE IS TO RIDE IN THE
WOODS UNTIL
FURTHER NOTICE.
THE TRAIL IS CLOSED.

The barn was deserted except for the horses - and little Missy, who had locked herself in the tack room:

"Jamie! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Why?"

"They said you were in the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"They said the bear attacked you."

"Uh ... where is everyone?"

"George and some neighbors went out in the woods. They all took their deer rifles."

"Rifles?"

"Yeah. They left right after they talked to the reporter."

"Reporter?"

"Yeah. He took lots of pictures. He even took one of the sheriff's car."

"Sheriff?"

"He wants to talk to you. So does the reporter. He wants to know how you felt when the bear clawed you. The TV people are coming later."

Jamie never got a chance to be on TV or talk to the sheriff or the reporter. And no one could find the bear. It was in a place no one could possibly see it.

A week later, the sign came down and everyone put their guns away. The local media went on to investigate alleged financial irregularities in the Drain Commissioners Office and forgot about the bear. But the surest indication that the bear was no longer a threat was that horses at the boarding barn finally calmed down.

They are very sensitive about that sort of thing.

Equine Humorist Bob Goddard hails from Ravenna, Michigan. His hilarious new book, *Horse Crazy! A Tongue-in-Cheek Guide for Parents of Horse-Addicted Girls* will be available in November of 2007 at www.horsecrazy.net.

