

Article published Jun 6, 2009

Arming yourself for the outdoors

By WILLIAM O'ROURKE

Having a national parks gun-toting provision slapped onto credit card reform legislation isn't as odd as it might seem. It's all in the name of freedom. When credit cards went viral in the last three decades they turned individuals into mini-Feds. Anyone could be Alan Greenspan and print money! So, why not let freedom ring? Since individuals can print money, why can't they arm themselves at least as well as Third World militias, ready for whatever jihad that interests them? From my cold dead hands, etc.

My household (wife, child, me) went to Yellowstone last June. And when you go to Yellowstone in June, you get more than a summer vacation -- you get a spring/winter vacation. Snow remains both on the mountain tops and in the valleys. Our boy was 17 at the time and wanted nothing but adventure, whereas I was just trying to keep up.

So we're climbing snow-capped peaks (Bunsen) at the tip of the park, way up on the northern edge, near Mammoth Then we're searching for grizzlies, not an occupation I ever sought. There's a lot of wildlife around that you can see by car; it is wonderful to see two gray wolves running along side a river, or a pronghorn giving birth, bouncing on her thin legs to shake out her new offspring. Or a moose resting in a grassy gully alongside the highway.

But it was the long hikes I tended to balk at and not for cardiovascular reasons. In Yellowstone you see this odd lemming-like crowd movement, the crowd made out of a variety of vehicles. A grizzly sighting! The roads in early June are not heavily traveled and one comes upon suddenly a clot of caravan grouped on a road. Cameras and binoculars are rife, all pointed at the animal or animals, but, as of last June, no rifles, shotguns, Glocks. The first one we saw was a large black bear playing around a tree. Later in the afternoon, a mother grizzly with a newborn, lopping down a hill. Isn't that cute! June in Yellowstone, since it's actually spring in Yellowstone, sees a lot of birthing. And you know how parents are when they have young to protect.

As I watch the people trying to get as close as they can for their picture-taking (until a ranger shows up and shoos them back to the road) I think of Jeff Goldblum's lines in the second "Jurassic Park" movie. First it's aahs and oohs and then it's screaming and running. He was talking about dinosaurs. It is, what? thrilling, to see a grizzly. That mother (bear) was large. Unfortunately for me, the hill she was running down was around the corner from our destination, the starting site for our long hike. But that wouldn't deter my wife and son. So, we park at the trail head and walk. I had read the handouts. If you see "carcasses" when you're hiking you should be alerted to the presence of bears. When we reached a high plateau there was nothing but carcasses along the worn path. When we hit the halfway mark of the hike there was a very large carcass, not that old, in a nearby thicket. Maybe it had just dropped dead. Heart problems.

The trouble with preserving wilderness in its "natural" state is that it remains wilderness. The centuries evaporate. This could be the 19th, but where was my buckskin and long rifle? Only an idiot would travel this landscape unarmed, I said to myself, long before I became aware the National Rifle Association wanted to equip me with a Kalashnikov for our tour of the park.

We made it back to the car after wandering through a herd of bison. They're big, too, up close and personal as they were. I guess we were like the majority of clueless tourists escaping our wild West experience unscathed. Over the history of the parks not many civilians have been killed by animals. Not many but some! At least a handful.

Heading back to Grand Tetons and Jackson Hole, we did think of looking up Dick Cheney, a resident of sorts.

Cheney, an espouser of the thumb-screw way of life, of course, knows how to fire guns. And it won't be just him any longer packing heat in our magnificent national parks soon. Look out. William O'Rourke teaches creative writing at the University of Notre Dame and lives in South Bend.