

BEAR ARMS IN A WHEELCHAIR



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Alas, the goblin itched to spike a fool. But the bloke in the silver wheelchair was no fool. Stealthy shadow warrior was he, prepared to present the overconfident goblin with a resolute surprise sheathed in concealed wait under his robes. – Unknown Warrior

Having to use a wheelchair to get around is no reason to be without personal protection and defenseless. You may look like a target of opportunity to Mr. Bad Guy, but your physically challenged “get-up” can be your cover, just like “Sergeant Granny” of the Police Department’s Decoy Squad. Furthermore, being in a wheelchair does appear to widen the disparity of the strength and force gap between you and Goofy the Goblin. This article is about taking the appropriate measures to reduce that disparity, so you’re empowered to defend yourself.

There are lots of ways to bear arms in preparation for personal defense in a wheelchair. Because many folks buy into the stereotype that folks in a wheelchair are disabled from defending themselves, you can benefit from the advantageous element of surprise if you have to act in defense of your life.

Let’s get down to the nitty gritty. There are two ways to carry a concealed weapon when you’re in a wheelchair: on your person or around your person.

Around Your Person

When you’re sitting in your wheelchair, you can carry your firearm in an appropriate type of bag or pouch secured to the chair. For example, most of the fanny packs or gunny sacks for on your person carry that we’ll be discussing below can be strapped to the arms or back of your wheelchair. One fellow I know keeps a revolver in a small knapsack tied to the side of his wheelchair.

There is nothing wrong with this mode of carry when you are in your chair. You should make sure you have quick, unimpeded access to your weapon. In my opinion, it makes the most sense to fasten the gun pack to the inside arm of your wheelchair (preferably the strong side) for security reasons. However, the important thing to remember is to NEVER leave the unexposed but unlocked firearm unattended. If you leave the wheelchair, the gun should leave with you. Unattended firearms tend to grow feet. In this case, they already have wheels!

I also recommend that you always carry a small flashlight in your fanny pack,

such as one made by Streamlight (800-523-7488 www.streamlight.com) or Surefire (800-828-8809 www.surefire.com). You should always have a powerful light with **fresh batteries** available for emergency use to aid your visibility in ambient light and at night.

On Your Person

The concealed carry “fanny pack,” “waist pack” or “gunny sack” is probably the most efficient and unobtrusive way to carry a concealed handgun if you use a wheelchair. The pouch, which will contain a compartment for your firearm, is best worn in the cross draw, weak side of your abdomen, in front of your hip position (opposite your appendix if you’re right handed). For folks who spend a lot of time sitting, the high ride, cross draw position keeps the gun comfortably out of the way, but easily accessible with the strong hand.

The trick in drawing from this position is not to cover (or “laser”) yourself with the muzzle when drawing the handgun. Thus, your draw should be practiced with an empty gun until it becomes smooth and precise. More on this in a moment.

There are many excellent products of this type on the market. Roma Leather makes an excellent and affordable line of concealment fanny packs in both leather and nylon, as well as pistol cases, organizers, leather concealment vests and accessory packs (800-998-7662 www.romaconceal.com).

Photo Below: Roma Nylon Fanny Pack.



Michaels of Oregon (800-845-2444 www.michaelsoregon.com) and DeSantis (800-424-1236 www.desantisholster.com) also make excellent product lines. Desantis calls their fanny pack the “Gunny Sack.” They also offer hip pouches and pistol packs that clip or slide on to your belt. Michaels of Oregon’s GunRunner Belt Pack Holsters also allow you to pack a large bore pistol with no one to know but you.

Photo Below: Desantis Gunnysack.



The advantage of carrying your concealed handgun in a fanny pack is that most gunny pouches have multiple compartments in which to carry your wallet, keys, change, a flashlight, a folding knife, OC pepper spray, and so on. This fact also normalizes the perceived purpose of the pouch and aides concealment.

One recommendation when shopping for a fanny pack--purchase one with a rip open gun compartment. These may come either with Velcro and snaps or zippers with loops to grab and rip open. You don’t want to have to fiddle with finding the zipper when you need fast access to your handgun.

The Five-Step Draw

The draw is broken down into steps you can learn it and practice it. In action, the steps form one smooth continuous flow.

Step One: With your weak hand, rip open the gun compartment.

Step Two: Hold the compartment flap open if the fastener is a Velcro snap. If it’s a zipper, hold the zipper down and acquire your strong hand, full grip on the gun, with your trigger finger “in register” along the frame.

Step Three: Smoothly draw your handgun out of its pouch into a close retention position. You can fire from this position if necessary.

Step Four: Bring your support hand over to meet your strong hand in the retention position. You can also fire from this protected position if necessary.

Step Five: With both hands in a proper wrap-around, two-handed grip, push the gun out toward the target to get a proper sight picture.

Cross Draw Outside the Waistband Belt Holsters (CD-OWB)

A CD-OWB is probably the next best mode of concealment carry for those who are seated in a chair. It allows comfortable, unimpeded access to the handgun in the sitting position. The draw from concealment is the same as with the fanny pack, minus Step One.

There’s nothing wrong with a cross draw inside the waist band holster (CD-IWB) if you can carry your handgun this way comfortably and access it easily. However, many folks who have a belly or a big waist find that an IWB rig pinches them in the cross draw position when they are seated. They also may have a more difficult time accessing the gun. DeSantis makes an excellent and affordable CD-OWB called the “Sky Cop” and Don Hume makes the first rate “The Partner-Cross Draw.”

Photo Below: Don Hume “Partner.”

Also worthy of consideration is the shoulder holster and harness. Again, the cross draw is similar as in the previous descriptions. However, I have one recommendation. If you get a shoulder rig, get one that holds the handgun in a



horizontal position with the butt vertical and the muzzle facing the rear. Products that hold the muzzle up into your armpit laser you, and I don’t like that concept. Also, products that hold the gun muzzle down make it harder to acquire your grip and draw the gun.

With all these holster choices, you should try before you buy. What is good for one person may not be good for another. One size rarely fits all. Excellent shoulder holster rigs are made by Mitch Rosen (603-647-2971 www.mitchrosen.com), Lou Alessi (716-691-5615 www.alessileather.com), DeSantis and Galco (800-737-1725 www.usgalco.com).

Another option would be a waist length jacket or vest for pocket carry. Coronado leather (800-283-9509 www.coronadoleather.com) makes a fine line of leather and suede jackets with dual, reinforced, inner pockets for cross draw. You can also carry a handgun in your strong side jacket pocket if the fit is right.

I believe that strong side, outside the waistband, inside the waist and pant pocket carries are bad bets for people in a wheelchair. Access to the gun is slow and these modes of carry in this position can be uncomfortable.

What’s nice about fanny pack carry is that you can carry a full-size handgun (such as a Government or Commander size 1911, a medium to full size Glock, Sig, or Smith & Wesson semi-auto, or a medium size revolver, such as a Smith & Wesson K or L frame) in a large fanny pack. The same is true with a shoulder harness or cross draw belt slide or scabbard.

Belly Bands

Gould and Goodrich (800-277-0732 www.gouldusa.com) makes an excellent belly band for discrete, under-the-shirt concealed carry. Their Body Guard Model T727 is a waistband holster of long lasting, 4 in. wide elastic with an adjustable, Velcro closure. The rig can be positioned for cross draw, appendix front or back concealed carry of your handgun. It also has two pouches for spare magazines or a knife. What’s unique about this design is that there is also a pad behind the gun holster for extra comfort. DeSantis and Galco also make excellent and very affordable belly band holsters.

Another advantage of a belly band is that it will hold your belly in.

Pepper Spray

Pepper spray is an effective, less-than-lethal tool in your personal self-defense arsenal. It is a product commonly used in law enforcement that works on the olfactory and mucous membrane systems of the body-

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-eyes, nose, mouth and lungs. Pepper spray of sufficient strength (oleoresin capsicum content) will usually incapacitate a subject in seconds and give you a chance to get away. The sprayed subject starts coughing spasmodically, his eyes reflexively flutter closed from the inflammation and stinging and he cannot keep his eyes open. As a self-defense tool, pepper spray can be used within a range of 8 feet or closer to enable escape in a violent physical confrontation.

I recommend that you carry a proven pepper spray product on you or in your fanny pack. I recommend the stream delivery system versus the cone or mist. The stream is more target-focused, and you're less apt to get back sprayed.

There are many good products on the market. Two brands that I recommend are Spitfire (800-SPITFIRE www.1800spitfire.com) and AERKO International (800-565-8475 www.aerko.com).

Choosing the Right Carry Gun

The best advice I can give you is to choose the most potent caliber you can effectively handle and practice, practice, practice with it. There is no "magic bullet." A well placed shot with a .32 is better than a miss with a .45. However, quality, small revolvers chambered in 38 Special or 38 Special +P and semi-autos chambered in 9mm and 9mm +P are reliable, easy to control and offer good "stopping power." Remember that choosing a handgun is a personal thing (see my article in Volume 02-Issue 2). You have to make sure the gun fits your hand, the grip is comfortable and the trigger is manageable.

Semi-automatics: With a semi-auto, you must evaluate whether you can easily, manually cycle the slide to chamber a round or clear a jam. Can you easily reach and operate the manual safety lever and decocker if the gun has one? Can you reach and operate the slide stop/release lever? These are questions you must evaluate.

Double action only semi-autos such as Glocks and Kahrs have the simplest manual of arms. However, many folks including this author really like the safety features built into Smith and Wesson's semi-autos. These include a two-stage, slide-mounted, safety/decocker and a magazine disconnect safety, such that the gun will not fire with the magazine removed, even with a round in the chamber! This latter feature has saved many a cop's life when the cop managed to drop the magazine before her gun was wrestled away by a bad guy.

The Smith & Wesson semi-autos (800-331-0852 www.smith-wesson.com) also

have a nice and smooth, first shot, double action trigger pull and subsequent shot, single action trigger pull. The double action trigger travel is long like that of a revolver, but this is a safety feature that minimizes the chance of an accidental or negligent discharge, with proper training of course. Furthermore, there are so many choices that there is a Smith semi-auto pistol out there that will fit anyone's hand.

Photos (Top to bottom): Smith and Wesson 9mm Model 3913TSW semi-auto, and the Smith and Wesson 340PDA IRLite .357 Magnum/.38 Special J-FRAME snubby.



L.W. Seecamp's double-action only, .32 and .380 ACP pocket pistols offer ease of concealment, yet pack a punch at bad breath range that's sure to ruin Goofy's day. And bad breath range is where you're going to be accosted if you're accosted in a wheelchair. Seecamps are very reliable little guns with a simple manual of arms (www.Seecamp.com).

Revolvers: The revolver has the simplest and easiest to learn manual of arms. With proper training in its use, its long and consistent double action only trigger decreases the likelihood of an

accidental or negligent discharge. Smith and Wesson's small, J-frame revolvers are easy to conceal in a fanny pack or jacket pocket, making them ideal as a primary or back-up carry gun for folks in a wheelchair or for anybody, really. Smith and Wesson still makes the best revolvers on the planet.

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

Keep it real! Remember to practice as you carry. In an emergency, when the adrenaline dumps, your muscle memory will take over and you will perform as you've trained. So, go to the range and (if it's permitted at the range you go to) practice shooting from your concealed carry rig. However, before you head to the range, make sure to perfect your draw by practicing it hundreds of times at home with a doubly and triply checked, empty gun.

Keep in mind that mental preparedness and tactics are keys to survival. Think through your personal defense options and practice visualization and mental rehearsal. See my article on "Psychological Preparedness" in Volume 01-Issue 3 (July/August 2004 issue) of this magazine.

In a wheelchair, you should also practice shooting and moving. This you might have to do as dry practice with an empty gun, unless you can use an outdoor range. Your adversary, Mr. Goofy Goblin, will no doubt expect you to be a stationary target. Well, surprise the creep!

Remember that your wheelchair is neither a Sherman Tank nor a Bradley Assault Vehicle. It provides neither cover nor concealment. However, you have options for going armed and responding to a deadly threat tactically. Make informed choices. Prepare your mind and your body for survival.

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