



THE REAL BEAR

By Phil Burpee

What are we to make of the plight of the grizzly bear? How can we fully comprehend the ecological and spiritual importance of this mighty animal amidst all the clutter of our frantic and disproportionately people-centred civilization? Who is this creature who we lump together with the shark, the wolf and the rattlesnake deep inside the dark cavern of our primordial fears – the slashing, snarling, brutish bogey-man of our imagination? Where might this sublime and peaceable beast find space to pursue the simple imperatives of life when all around there is the buzz and hum of humanity at work and play? Why must we now grapple with the shocking prospect of the impending extirpation of this ancient bruin from the shrinking wild lands of Alberta?

Our sisters and brothers of the venerable Blackfoot Nation have known the bear for many centuries. Both black and grizzly bears figure prominently in the physical and mythological lives of the Blackfoot. In all circumstances these bears have been afforded the greatest respect and consideration. They are considered to be our relatives. But, whereas the Blackfoot would from time to time hunt and kill the black bear for food, they tended to give the grizzly a wide, respectful berth. This was not only because of her ferocity when molested, but also because of the deeply human-like character of this shambling giant. And so, although the black bear was called simply *Kyaio*, 'the bear', the grizzly was reverentially referred to as *Nitakyaio*, 'the Real Bear'.

The late and fondly remembered Andy Russell, who made his home for many decades at the Hawk's Nest south of Twin Butte, also came to understand *Nitakyaio* very well. Andy was an outfitter, wrangler and guide who took paying customers by horseback deep into the Flathead country long before the arrival of roads, seismic lines and quads. Eventually he wearied of hiring out to



Grizzly in the Highwood. PHOTO: D. OLSON

kill these bears for trophies and adventure and began to go, first alone and then with his sons, into their country instead with a camera. The Russells came to gain such respect and admiration for the grizzly bear that they stopped taking rifles with them altogether, choosing instead to learn the language and customs of *Nitakyaio* by way of protection. In these years their knowledge of the 'Way of the Grizzly' became legendary and they spoke out more and more passionately for the protection of the grizzly. Just two years ago Andy's son Charlie premiered a film called 'Living with the Grizzlies of Kamchatka' in which he portrayed his decade-long experiences of raising orphaned grizzly cubs in the wilds of the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia's Far East. Charlie was finally chased out of the country by a poaching lobby backed by corrupt government and military officials. But he demonstrated through this body of work, as Andy had before him, that the grizzly bear was a creature of great complexity and warmth, far from the blood-thirsty marauder painted by popular culture.

Today in B.C. the provincial government still allows a grizzly hunt. Apparently the plummeting sperm count recently documented in men is being offset

by testosterone-addled males who equate the slaying of a magnificent, intelligent and noble animal with being a 'real man'. Here in Alberta the four-year moratorium on grizzly hunting is due to expire next year, and a vigorous lobby is seeking to reinstate it, at least in the Grande Cache area. What makes this not only deplorable but also astonishing is the fact that a recent government-commissioned study has found that there are currently less than 600 grizzlies remaining in the wilds of Alberta. This is a perilously small gene pool. And yet hunting, important threat as it is, is perhaps one of the lesser threats faced by this bear. The far greater overall threat is the ever-expanding human interference with and occupation of the grizzly's habitat. Foremost here must be the burgeoning web of access routes, otherwise known as 'linear features', reaching ever deeper into the grizzly's domain. These routes are typically propagated by activities such as logging, oil and gas exploration and recreational development.

What is consistently missed in the rush for more backcountry access is that the mere exposure of the grizzly to humans harms the bear's well being. Any interruption that puts a grazing or browsing wild animal off its food, especially in the winter months or in

the fattening time leading up to them, tends to degrade the health and vigour of that animal and likely will cause it to fail eventually. Perhaps a surprising element of this finding, demonstrated by the failing health of the woodland caribou found in the Selkirk Range in southeastern B.C., is that it is not just the notorious infestation of quads and snow machines in the backcountry that threatens wildlife; non-motorized recreational activities, such as cross-country skiing, invade the caribou's habitat at a time when every morsel of calorie intake is vital. Without the security of genuinely wild spaces, many animals cannot sustain their population numbers. This is especially true for the grizzly bear who finds humans at best annoying but mostly just flat out loathsome.

In a recent letter to the *Pincher Creek Echo*, a reader wrote to complain loudly about proposed efforts to provide the Castle Special Places area with legislative protection against further pressures on the fragile wild lands in this part of the southern Rockies. She targeted, many times, so-called 'extreme environmentalists' who would take away the freedoms of the good folk of the region who had enjoyed unrestricted access to those lands for the past hundred years or so. She further claimed that no better stewards could be found than the ranchers and recreational-users, such as hunters, quadders, and snowmobilers, who had protected this landscape so assiduously for so long.

This is a very peculiar reading of stewardship history. It has not been just one hundred years – it has been more like one hundred and fifty odd years since our invading ancestors, and now ourselves, have overseen, in a decidedly perverse form of stewardship, the extirpation of the buffalo, the plains grizzly and the prairie wolf. We have brought to the brink of extirpation a long list of creatures such as the swift fox, the peregrine falcon, the burrowing owl, the greater sage-grouse, the northern leopard frog, the yucca moth and many more (See the April 2009 issue of the *Wild Lands Advocate*, p. 11, for a complete list). This is not to mention the plant life that also is in dire peril, especially in our dry and brittle grassland ecosystems.

My community, the ranching community, faces particular challenges

in grappling with large predator issues. Historically cats, bears, wolves and coyotes were shot on sight. They were considered varmints and an ongoing threat to cattle husbandry. Little thought was given to larger ecological issues and the value of an intact food chain on the landscape. In the sheep country of Wyoming and Colorado every possible predator was exterminated – all members of the weasel family, all foxes, coyotes, wolves, bears, eagles, hawks, ravens - anything that might even faintly consider dining on lamb or mutton. The result was a vast, antiseptic, lifeless baize of green, rolling prairie with nothing moving on it but brainless sheep.

In Alberta today, however, the consciousness of the ranching community has evolved considerably. Although it has been many years since the grizzly has been seen in my increasingly populous neighbourhood in the South Porcupine, encounters still occur in the foothills. But much progress has been made in managing not only grizzly problems but wolf predation as well. Many of my colleagues here now recognize that a good balance of predator/prey populations enhances the overall health of the natural systems on which their operations ultimately depend. We are called upon as a society to see to it that ranchers are compensated for stock lost to predation and that resources are in place to remove, or possibly kill, individual problem animals. But we must also see to it that such refuges as now exist are maintained and enhanced.

A recent example of how this can be thrown into turmoil is the proposed gas pipeline slated to run down through the Sullivan Creek area to Highway 22 south of Chain Lakes. The proposed route would run through undisturbed mountain and foothill regions where wolves and grizzlies are known to be reasonably well balanced with their ungulate prey. Ranchers in the area say they have achieved a relatively stable situation with stock depredation, primarily because the large predators are well provided for in the backcountry and therefore are less inclined to bother stock. They claim the upset and turmoil caused by this pipeline disturbance would send predators down once again to seek domestic stock as prey. This would pit the livelihood of

these ranchers against the lives of these animals. In short, if we will continue to accept societal responsibility for producing beef on the landscape then we must see to it that predator control is delivered by habitat protection and not just out of the muzzle of a rifle. Safe refuges are vital.

In the Book of Genesis mankind is given dominion over Nature – over everything that walks, crawls or swims. We are let loose on the land to do with it as we see fit. What we have seen fit to do is to despoil and sublimate Nature to our needs. I once listened to a biologist speaking on the radio about his perception of the need to establish biological island refuges which would need to function for several hundred to a thousand years, until some hoped-for future date when humankind would have learned that we cannot occupy and exploit the entire planet to the exclusion of all other creatures. At this distant date, as we recreate spaces for our fellow creatures, the surviving representatives of those species will move down out of the hills to once again roam their ancestral homes. This would be the true Ark, spilling its passengers back out onto the reclaimed shores of Creation.

The grizzly bear, like us a top predator and the ruler of her world, is a powerful symbol of how we are being called to act. This is serious business. We may think we have a divine right to perch our ample buttocks on quads and snow machines and bomb up into the backyard of the grizzly bear. But we do not. We do not belong there. Our voyeuristic culture tells us that everything is out there to further our amusement. It is not. Out there in the backcountry the Real Bear walks the high trails and sleeps within the winter fastness. If we cannot learn to leave her in peace then we will not learn the lessons of our own limitations and, therefore, of our own survival. Such gifts as we squander now will not be offered again. For such as goes the Monarch of the Mountains, so some day, with neither fanfare nor regret, will go we. 🐻

Phil Burpee, with his partner Esther, runs a small cow/calf operation at the south end of the Porcupine Hills. He is a past president of the South Porcupine Hills Stewardship Association – a ranchers' advocacy group.