



GRIZZLY BEAR #16 A.K.A. SKOKI

By Colleen Campbell

This is a biography of a bear born wild, collared and numbered by researchers, victimized by passers-by and, finally, named by a zookeeper

In late January 1988, Alberta's central Rockies had settled into a typical midwinter period of high pressure which brought crisp, clear, cold weather. The lengthening days were more obvious because of the incessant blue skies and, in the darkness of some of the carefully excavated dens high on the slopes, grizzly sows, only slightly awake, were bearing their tiny young. Like all newly born grizzly bear cubs, the cub to become GB #16 weighed about a pound and was nearly bald. Though his eyes were closed, though his hearing and sense of smell were still undeveloped and though his mouth had no teeth, this weak, demanding little creature was able to find his mother's nipples, to nurse and stay warm for the remainder of the seasonal hibernation.

For the next few years he lived exclusively with his mother and other surviving siblings, learning what he needed to survive in a hazardous world. From his parent he learned when and where to dig for *Hedysarum* (northern sweetvetch) roots, where the *Equisetum* (horsetail) could be found, how to locate carrion, where to ford rivers, roads and railways, and who and what to avoid in his environment. Sometime during his third or fourth summer his mother would have rejected him and his siblings. She was ready to breed again.

In adolescence – the two to four years between living in the company of the sow and reaching breeding status – a bear is vulnerable. An adolescent bear has no established status and all the learning it has accumulated is frequently tested.

During the summer of 1993, the adolescent bronze-coloured male was relegated by his immaturity, life experience and possibly by the difficult summer season to grazing in the lower Bow Valley. This valley is also the route of the Trans-



Title: *Paháwitz-na'an*, watercolour, 4" by 6" © COLLEEN CAMPBELL

Canada Highway, the Bow Valley Parkway and the Canadian Pacific Railway – all much-used transportation routes. The young bear, one of the small number of resident grizzlies in the lower Bow Valley, shared his 'place' with cars, tractor trailer trucks, trains and several million tourists. In the wet and cold summer of 1993 even the usually productive habitat of the lower Bow had a limited berry crop. The bear who would soon be labeled Grizzly Bear #16 foraged habitually between Banff and Castle Junction.

Like people, bears have a personal range of comfort when encountering others. Typically, bears will avoid humans or show indifference. Every bear, though, is unique and behaviours differ. This bear was dauntless, not fearful at all of people.

Initially, he was disinterested in food from 'unidentified human remains': picnic scraps, campground refuse, regular garbage and grain spills common along the railroad tracks. He ate berries from *Shepherdia canadensis* (Canadian buffaloberry) which lines the highway

verges; his mere presence was enough to stop traffic.

Park wardens and researchers became aware of the young grizzly about halfway through that cold rainy summer when the grizzly was impassively causing traffic hazards on both highways in the lower Bow. Although this bear was occasionally visible to automobile passengers he was not a problem animal. It was during this summer that the young grizzly bear was trapped and radio-collared; he became known as GB #16.

Researchers, wardens and volunteers worked very hard during the summer and autumn of 1993, monitoring the bear and trying to aversively condition him to our presence. Aversive conditioning of Grizzly Bear #16 involved the use of deterrents – rubber bullets or cracker shells – to cause him to associate discomfort with human presence. In 1993 he was relatively indifferent to humans; when approached to within about 50 metres he tended to move slowly, imperatively away.

Grizzly Bear #16 survived his first summer of encounters with humans. The lower Bow Valley was a major part of his home range and over the next few summers he fed frequently along the verge of the Trans-Canada or the Bow Valley Parkway. Increasingly, people stopped their vehicles. Slowly, Grizzly Bear #16 learned that these creatures – humans – were apparently harmless.

At times, the bear's attempts to cross a road were impaired by excessive numbers of humans blocking his manoeuvres. In spite of efforts to protect Grizzly Bear #16, during the following summers he was exposed to thousands of people; many foolishly left their vehicles to approach him for a better look or to photograph him. GB #16 did not become overly defensive towards these invasions of his personal space until 1996.

A bear's focus during the summer season is to avoid bigger, possibly dangerous bears and to eat. Biological needs drive bears to consume food, gathering enough energy to sleep through the winter without waking, and to become large enough to eventually compete for a mate. The balance of energy gained to energy spent is seasonal. Gathering food is done, always, in the easiest, most energy-efficient way. Human food is 'easy gain' for a bear.

At some time during his summers in the Bow Valley, Grizzly Bear #16 was introduced to food from human sources. Wardens and researchers found remnants of sandwiches and other human food on the roadside after breaking up car jams. A researcher witnessed a camper throwing an apple to GB #16 in the campground at Lake Louise.

Bears are intelligent animals and they learn easily; Grizzly Bear #16 began to associate humans with food. With that association came behavioural changes. People were approaching him more closely; they were encroaching on and threatening his personal space. He became bolder around humans, perhaps intolerant. He was defending his personal space.

During the summer of 1996, Grizzly Bear #16 passed periodically through the campground at Lake Louise, one night tripping on and tearing a tent. He

passed through the town of Field; some mornings he passed by the back door of Laggan's Mountain Bakery in Lake Louise, reportedly sticking his head in the door on one occasion. During the previous winter about 500 pounds of spilled grain were dumped in a pit in the home range of #16 and by summer the dump of nicely fermented grain was attracting him to feed.

Over the course of that same summer Grizzly Bear #16 became a 'victimized animal'. By 'victimized' I mean any wild animal that has succumbed to temptations offered or left unintentionally by people. Whether it is the dog food on the back porch or the garbage we leave poorly contained or the grease spilled on a picnic table that is not cleaned up – these temptations attract animals. Too often we call the victimized animal a 'problem animal.' This term should not be applied to these casualties. 'Problem animal' implies that the situation was initiated by the wild animal when it is human behaviour that is problematic. Associations of humans with food were firmly reinforced. Grizzly Bear #16 was reported to have approached, at least, people on the side of the road, likely in anticipation of being fed. Eventually, he bluff-charged two vehicles. This was interpreted as overtly aggressive behaviour but it also was possibly a defence of his space.

The potential hazard of an antagonistic reaction by #16 to a human on foot was compounded by his association of people with food. This conditioning, haphazardly orchestrated by every person who approached him over the years, may have led him to approach people. Parks managers were unprepared to risk such a probable encounter; Grizzly Bear #16 could not be trusted simply to abandon the area if someone approached him.

In July 1996, the bear was relocated from the Bow Valley north to a back-country area where researchers could track him from the air. Within a few days, though, he returned to the Bow Valley. For a short time he survived without interference, but his next 'infraction' led to being tranquilized and relocated again — this time to isolation at the Calgary Zoo.

The initial plan was to find a zoo home for #16 somewhere else in the world. The decision to keep #16 at the Calgary Zoo depended on his ability to accommodate to and live peacefully with the zoo's two resident brown bears, Louise and Khutzeymateen. After his capture he was given an opportunity to calm down; he learned quickly to associate his 'keeper' with food and care. He then met the bears, who would be his life companions, through a barricade that discouraged direct and unpredictable encounters. True to the character he had displayed as a free and wild bear, he learned quickly to accept the new conditions of his life.

When he was captured, Grizzly Bear #16 was on the cusp of maturity, of becoming a breeding male. If he had survived in the wild, his genes would have been secure in the wild population and he would have yielded valuable information to the research of wild grizzly bears in the central Canadian Rockies.

Neutered and living in a zoo, Grizzly Bear #16 is dead to the wild population of bears from which he came. As a zoo animal, Grizzly Bear #16 is of value to the wild populations as an important example. His story impresses me with the importance of leaving wild animals to their wildness; it should teach us to avoid contributing to the habituation that leads to removing wild animals from their natural environment, natural behaviours and reproductive patterns.

Skoki still resides at the Calgary Zoo. He gets along well with and is particularly caring of Louise, the only other surviving grizzly bear. Skoki is now 22 years old and weighs about 840 pounds. In the wild, he would be past his prime; he would no longer be a dominant male. While he might possibly still be alive, the wounds he may have suffered through possible conflicts with younger, fitter, males would not guarantee that. In the zoo, he may live another 15 years in good health.

It is important to keep the story of how Skoki became a captive bear alive. We should continue to learn from his story. The best place for a healthy bear is in the wild. 🐻