



2010 UPDATE ON SKOKI

By Colleen Campbell

Now 22 years old, Skoki has been at the Calgary Zoo for 14 years. There his life has followed a very different course than it would have had he remained in the wild. In his home territory he would have lived quite a solitary life. He only would have sought out other grizzlies for breeding. He would have spent most of his life avoiding humans, foraging and sleeping alone in a den every winter. *If* still alive in the wild, he would be several years past his prime.

In contrast to a wild life, Skoki has lived socially and well with other grizzly bears in the same enclosure. He was introduced to Louise and Kutzeymateen soon after his arrival at the Calgary Zoo in 1996. By then, Louise, 20 years old, was a long-term resident at the zoo. She had previously been in the company of Curly and Florence, two older grizzly bears. One winter, Florence, from the Northwest Territories, moved into a den on the hillside of the grizzly enclosure and to everyone's surprise, emerged in

the spring with a cub sired by Curly. That cub is Kutzeymateen. Curly and Florence both died before Skoki's arrival. Louise died in 2008.

For a short time another adult grizzly shared the enclosure with Louise, Skoki and Kutzy. In 2000 Nakiska an unmarked bear from the eastern slopes south of Canmore, was removed from her home range – habitat that had been dramatically degraded during her life because of residential, recreational and resort development. As an 18-year-old bear, Nakiska fared poorly with the dramatic change in her life and sadly she died during the summer of 2001.

The Calgary Zoo has housed all three North American bear species. Almost always, other bears may be seen in nearby enclosures. There are four resident black bears just across the hill from Skoki's enclosure. For a couple of years there were two orphaned polar bear cubs 'next door', waiting for a facility to be built for them in Quebec. Mistaya, the single surviving cub of Banff's

well-known grizzly #66 was housed at the Calgary Zoo until a suitable home was found for him. The Calgary Zoo requested that Koda, a grizzly orphan from the Valley Zoo in Edmonton, join Mistaya for company. Cubs spend little time alone. Both orphans benefited from and seemed to love each other's company. They were kept together at the Calgary Zoo until an exhibit was built in Saskatoon.

Now they serve as ambassadors in Saskatchewan, representing a species that once roamed the prairies.

Skoki's keepers do their best to insure that his days are filled with variety. The bear habitats are changed regularly. Sometimes the bears are moved into different enclosures. Skoki is visited regularly and always he is a centre of attention for various groups enjoying and learning from the Zoo's programs about bears. Two keepers offer educational programs to visitors; one speaks with the participants, while the other is attentive to the bears. Some of

the special programs occur in the service area; it is a quiet and very special way to visit with the bears. The keepers provide enrichment for the bears at unpredictable times and occasionally visit for a little training session to encourage certain kinds of behaviour. Sometimes they simply stop by to sit, sip a cup of tea and visit with the bears — what we might regard as a social visit. Food is delivered in different ways to promote the natural curiosity and creativity that bears in the wild use to find food.

Skoki's health is good. He hovers around 400 kilograms and on occasion he is immobilized to have his teeth and general physical condition checked. Three fulltime zoo veterinarians supervise his care to insure that he does not have a tooth abscess or the tumours that the aged in any mammalian species are more likely to develop.

Each bear is as distinct as each human. Skoki accommodated to life

in the zoo with the same ease that he accepted tourists on the Bow Valley Parkway. Ultimately his unique personality has rendered him a "star" in educational programming at the Calgary Zoo; Zoo staff and visitors alike love him.

Too often the norms of our society dictate that grizzly bears like Skoki should be removed from the wild. Unfortunately only a few Skokis can find homes in captivity. While arguably Skoki has had a relatively good life at the Calgary Zoo the fate of many other orphaned grizzlies and victimized bears is uncertain and darker. There are only 250 accredited zoos in North America and many fewer have suitable bear enclosures. The experience of Skoki underlines that we must treat grizzlies well; most importantly, we must be proactive and protect intact and connected wild habitat so that grizzly bears continue to survive in wild Alberta.

Nearly 1.5 million people visit the Calgary Zoo every year. Skoki is an influential ambassador for bears and other wild animals and a source of inspiration for humans. Skoki helps tell the story of why we need to protect wild habitat. With the attentive care he is given by his keepers, the Zoo veterinarians and other staff, Skoki may live to 40 years or more. May he live that long and may Alberta be blessed with more grizzlies in the wild than we have now. 🐻

Colleen, Victoria-born, has lived in Canmore since 1982. In 1991 she expanded her enjoyment of the Rockies from climbing and skiing to start work as a wildlife researcher. The knowledge gained there informs her artwork and writing.



Skoki. PHOTO: C. CAMPBELL