

# Perceptions of Predatory Wildlife

By Tempest Emery



Typically, the predator is understood as an animal that kills and eats other animals for food. What does this understanding mean for how we regard and treat these animals? This conventional identification defines the predator solely in relation to its carnivorous tendencies and its ability to inflict harm upon other creatures. This blanket categorization obscures the differences among species of predators and among the individuals comprising their populations. Wolves and cougars, for example, are both classified as predatory beings even though they have vastly different hunting strategies, where wolves hunt in packs and cougars are known for living rather solitary lives. The conventional understanding of the predator also tends to erase the fact that some subsist on an omnivorous diet. This blinkered perspective forms the basis for what Kevin Van Tighem describes in *Predators: Wild Dogs and Cats* as a war against predators. He explains that, through use of such weapons as “strychnine, bullets, snares, traps, and cyanide gas” millions of wolves, coyotes, foxes, cougars, lynx, and bobcats (not to mention bears) have been killed in North America in the last century. The understanding at the root of this approach to predatory wildlife ignores a much more complex reality. With an eye to identifying alternatives to this history of killing, of slaughter, it is worthwhile to explore how we have come to approach these species with such antagonism and violence.

Examining the subtle differences between the use of the word “predator” in relation to humans compared to animals, and parsing the history of the term closely, reveals much about the human perspective on organisms

deemed to be predatory and helps to illuminate the ways in which these creatures have been conceptually constructed in the public mind. Interestingly, though today we usually apply the term “predator” to animals, the definitions of predator in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, along with the details of its origin included there, illustrate that this concept has its roots in human-centered, or anthropocentric, perspective activities. The first entry for this term in the *OED* relates to people, defining a predator as “a person who plunders or pillages; a ruthlessly exploitative or rapacious individual; a depredator.” Predators violated property rights; predators were greedy thieves. This concept takes on a different meaning when applied to other species, as demonstrated by the second *OED* definition entry which states that a predator is also “an animal that preys on other animals; an animal that eats and kills prey; a carnivore.” Though these descriptions are housed under the same term, there is a significant difference regarding what types of actions are regarded as predatory. When used in relation to a person, the predator is defined by stealing or looting, taking that which does not belong to him or her. When this concept is employed in reference to other beings, however, it is to demarcate actions taken in order to get life-sustaining food, a process necessitating the death of other organisms. What remains constant, regardless of the species in question, is that when individuals are classified as predators, it’s because their actions are interpreted or read through the human lens.

A review of the origins of the word “predator” also illustrates that this concept is deeply rooted in human perceptions and social

relations. The *OED* notes an isolated use of the term by British writer Barnaby Rich, who includes it in his 1581 work, *Don Simonides*, to describe one of his human male characters. The *OED* also indicates that by 1745 the word “predator” came to represent a “person who lives on booty or plunder.” It is not until 1908 that it is used in relation to other creatures, with the *OED* pointing to an article written by C.W. Woodworth titled, “The Theory of the Parasitic Control of Insect Pests,” published in the journal *Science* in August of that year. There he describes various insects and parasites as “predators” or “predaceous.” According to the *OED*, it wasn’t until 1909 before this term came to denote those creatures that prey on other animals. This brief overview of the origins of this term demonstrates that the word “predator” was first used to refer to people who behaved in greedy or voracious ways with respect to property or possessions, long before it was employed to categorize other species with a dietary need for meat. Such a transformation in the way this term is used indicates how we, as humans, perceive other species’ carnivorous feeding practices. We might employ the notion of the predator simply as a means of identifying and classifying creatures that consume the flesh of other organisms, but the concept itself is imbued with a sense of avarice and excess which is, in turn, attributed to those beings we characterize. Put another way, if the word “predator” has been used for a long period of time to describe or signify people who pillage or plunder with voracity and greed, when it becomes synonymous for “carnivore” it suggests that the same qualities reside in the human perception of meat-eat-

ing species.

Where human predators are depicted as people who pillage and take what is not theirs, it is interesting to consider the extent to which the connotations of greed and thievery animate our interpretation of nonhuman predators. This line of thought is particularly intriguing given that the mass amount of killing Van Tighem refers to largely responds to the belief that such creatures pose a threat to people on at least two levels: “They hunt the animals we hunt or raise for food, and occasionally, they even kill us.” When considered from this angle, the notion of the nonhuman predator reflects our own human anxieties and fears. Managing predatory populations through killing, Van Tighem says, allows us to reinforce our dominance and control over nature and is meant to eliminate our fear. This dynamic perpetuates conflict and violence between the human species and any other species we perceive to be dangerous or capable of seizing what we consider to be ours, be it wild game, livestock, or our own lives. If this often savage and damaging relationship is ever to be transformed, a greater understanding of these “wild hunters” is crucial, as Van Tighem suggests. It will contribute to redeveloping a connection between humans and other members of the natural world in posi-

tive and mutually beneficial ways. This is not to say that all people view predatory species as plundering, rapacious, pillagers of property, or that no one is able to see carnivores as anything other than ravenous meat-eating beasts. But, coming to understand the trajectory of some of the conventional concepts we use to understand these animals is useful if we want to shift the course those notions take in the future.

In order to begin the process of re-establishing our relationships with predatory species outside the borders of current, often violent, paradigms, we must first expand our perceptions of them beyond our preoccupation with their capacity to kill and consume other beings. Locating examples illustrating this adjustment in perspective serves as one way to start pushing on some of the conventional boundaries drawn around those beings we identify as predators. Sid Marty’s *The Black Grizzly of Whiskey Creek*, a work of creative non-fiction that examines a series of bear attacks that took place in 1980 in the Whiskey Creek area just outside of the Banff town site in Banff National Park, is such an example. Instead of treating the predators of his story as generic representatives of the natural world, Marty looks closely at the individual experiences of each of his nonhuman “char-

acters” and analyzes the specific circumstances surrounding the events in which they are involved. He investigates a moment in Banff’s recent past in which people and bears came into serious conflict with one another. His carefully researched representation of the events of 1980, as well as of the bears held responsible, both illuminates and challenges common understandings of the notion of the predator. At various points Marty writes directly from the perspectives of the two bears associated with the Whiskey Creek incidents. By weaving those imagined voices through a broader account of the events of that summer he demonstrates the role humans play in constructing a creature we deem to be predatory. Marty’s unique approach to this problematic moment in our history with our ursine neighbours creates space in which we, too, can question and adjust our own understanding of bears and, by extension, other species we call predators.

Calling attention to some of the roots of our ideas about and approaches to predatory wildlife, as well as considering unique points of view held by people who depart from those established concepts, is one avenue by which we can begin to initiate change in the public perceptions and governmental policies that impact such species. 🐾

Tempest Emery recently completed her Master of Arts in English at the University of Calgary. Her work there focused on representations of predators in works of creative nonfiction.

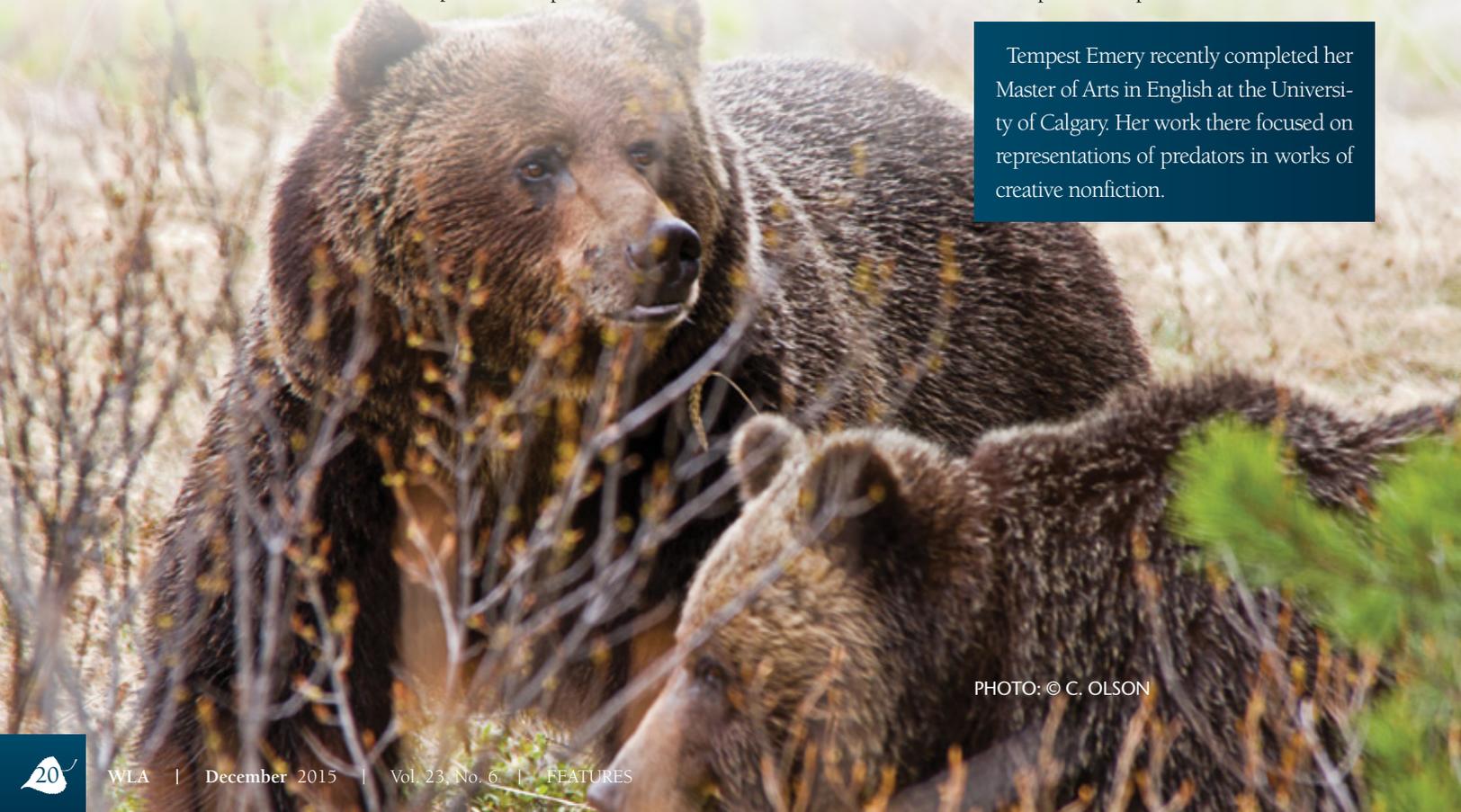


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