

Bear 148's Last Summer



By Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist

It seems that almost every week this summer Bear 148 was in the news. She demonstrated the kind of media prowess that one could only expect from Banff National Park's most iconic female bear.

She first made the news in late April, when a woman who was dog sledding on the Spray River Trail was surprised when Bear 148 came out of the trees and followed her for a while, before retreating back into the trees.

In May, Bear 148 was at Mount Norquay, likely taking advantage of the spring forage on the sunny slopes. That was when a group of hikers, with a dog in tow, came around a corner and caught her off guard. She huffed and followed them for a distance and the hikers – nervous about being followed – let their dog off the leash. Bear 148 then chased the dog for some distance before the dog, not surprisingly, ran back to its owners. The hikers took refuge in a Parks Canada vehicle and waited for Bear 148 to leave.

Less than a week later, Bear 148 stumbled upon a rugby practice after an unsuccessful evening of chasing elk near the Bow River. She surveyed the scene – 80 high schoolers huddled in a group, packs strewn about with snacks inside – and crossed the field and went on her way.

In June, Bear 148 moved from Banff to Canmore to take advantage of buffaloberries which ripen earlier there than the ones in the National Park. Unfortunately, this area is also very popular with hikers; as a result, Bear 148 had a number of run-ins with humans. In early July, after charging someone with a stroller and a dog in Quarry Lake, she

was relocated to a remote area in Banff. The province stated that she would be killed if she had one more aggressive encounter outside of the National Park.

The public cried out against the province's ultimatum and rallied to try to save Bear 148. A petition started by a local Banff resident shortly after her relocation quickly garnered widespread support. It read in part:

"We know of so many people that have had so many positive encounters with Bear 148 and understand how important she is to Banff National Park and Alberta. She belongs here and on our landscape, the only home she knows and should not be executed for simply being a bear. She is surrounded by millions of people yearly and does a pretty good job of avoiding them. [...] our government needs to stand up to its commitment of conservation over euthanasia or relocation."

Inevitably, Bear 148 returned to Canmore shortly after her relocation and had yet another string of encounters with people. Likely thanks to the level of public outpouring of support for her, Bear 148 was not killed but instead was relocated to Kakwa Provincial

Park, west of Grande Cache along the BC/Alberta border.

The decision to move her was probably the best of a bad list of options: clearly wildlife managers don't want to see someone harmed and encounters with Bear 148 were only continuing to escalate. Unfortunately, the decision to relocate a bear is too often akin to a death sentence – according to the province, the mortality rate for relocated bears is estimated to be around 50 percent. Bears rely on their knowledge of an area to survive; as a result, relocated bears tend to travel more and expend more calories searching for food, which means that they cannot build up enough fat reserves before hibernation. Additionally, problem bears often do not stop being problem bears after they have been moved – they often are killed after continuing to get into conflict with humans.

The decision to relocate Bear 148 also reflected clearly the fact that we are currently not managing our wild spaces in the best

"She represents the fine balance between keeping grizzly bears alive on this landscape amid millions of tourists and residents alike in a valley that is quickly teetering towards the cliff's edge and the point of no return in terms of development, visitation and human usage"

John Marriott



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interest of our wildlife. Bear 148 had been in many ways a model bear, living (perhaps overly) comfortably with people without, perhaps miraculously, ever developing a taste for human sourced food. This might be attributed in large part to her mother, Bear 64, who had managed to live successfully in Banff for 24 years. She taught Bear 148 the day-to-day complexities of living in a developed mountain valley, where navigating wildlife corridors, popular hiking trails and scarce sources of food are all essential to surviving in and around Banff National Park.

Six years old in the summer of 2017, Bear 148 may have been the ideal bear to pass on those very same skills onto the next generation of Banff bears. In fact, some speculated that she may have become pregnant this past summer and, if so, her increased nutritional requirements may have spurred on her increasingly risky behaviour.

But, regardless of whether she would have delivered cubs this winter, people played an important, unhelpful, role in her aggressive encounters. For example, Bear 148 clearly exhibited defensive reactions when it came to dogs. This is a common response for many bears. Wildlife managers speculate this is because they may equate dogs with their wild and competitive cousins, wolves. There should have been stricter enforcement of keeping dogs on leashes in areas where bears are; dog closures should be in place in areas where bears are known to respond aggressively when provoked.

There is also a responsibility on our part as locals to set a good example and to carry bear spray, respect closures, and to keep

our wild spaces clean. While Bear 148 was neither aggressive nor a garbage bear, there have been instances where wildlife have been killed for those very reasons. Most notably, the recent decimation of the wolf pack in Banff was largely due to people refusing to clean up their campsites or at times even feeding the pack.

Provincial response to wildlife encounters also has room for improvement. The current guide for grizzly bear encounters states that after just one aggressive encounter with people, provincial wildlife managers can either relocate or euthanize a bear. After more than one encounter with people, a bear is killed. The province makes no distinction in its response between developed areas – where human safety takes priority – and protected areas, where arguably grizzly recovery should take priority and humans are visitors.

Parks Canada appears to take a more measured approach, recognizing that bears need room to roam and are challenged by the number of visitors to our mountain national parks. Their standard approach is to assess a bear's rationale for behaving a certain way and to decide what role humans may have had in provoking the encounter. The Rocky Mountain Outlook highlighted what a marked difference the two approaches make in a story published in late July:

“Figures provided to the Outlook by the province show 56 black bears and two grizzly bears have been shot and killed in the Cochrane-Canmore district over the past 10 years. Officials were not able to break down the numbers solely for Canmore. In addition, 101 black bears and 30 grizzly

bears have been relocated over the same time frame in the same district.

In Banff National Park, by comparison, one grizzly bear and three black bears have been killed in the past decade. Parks Canada has not relocated a bear outside of its home range over that same time.”

Finally, it's clear that the trends of increasing development and commercialization in our National Parks and gateway communities such as Canmore are spelling disaster for wildlife. If we don't provide them with secure habitat and spaces to go, more human-bear conflicts seem inevitable.

While you can move a problem bear, you have not removed the root of the problem. If we don't address the issues that created this situation in the first place, bears will continue to get killed. If Bear 148, a bear essentially raised to live with people can't make it in and around our National Parks, then what bear can?

Bear 148 was in the news again, likely for the last time, in late September. Less than 70 days before B.C. will end all grizzly bear trophy hunting in the province, Bear 148 was shot and killed by a non-resident hunter in the McBride area. Information from her tracking collar suggested that Bear 148 had adapted well to her new territory. As an Alberta government wildlife biologist said, Bear 148 “was kind of being the perfect bear doing bear things away from people. To my knowledge, there had been no reports of any conflicts.”

Tragic, isn't it? Bear 148's reward for good behaviour is to hang on someone's wall. ▲

The pace of development in the Bow valley around Canmore leaves less and less room for wildlife to move. PHOTO: © N. DOUGLAS