

Skoki:

The Long and Longer Life of a Marvelous Bear – 33 Years this Coming Winter

By Colleen Campbell



Three grizzly bear cubs, orphaned after a hunter killed their mother during Alberta's spring black bear hunt, reignited the debate about zoos and bears. Did the Alberta government do the "right thing" when it sent the cubs to the Calgary Zoo? Should the Zoo have sent them to the Greater Vancouver Zoo where they will spend the rest of their lives? These hard questions, ones without easy answers, led to this reflection on the life of Skoki, one of two grizzly bears held in captivity at the Calgary Zoo.

Skoki, a grizzly bear from the Bow Valley in Banff National Park, has lived at the Calgary Zoo for the past 24 years. Visitors lucky enough to traipse through the "Wilds of the Canadian Rockies" section of the zoo

will likely see him but may not appreciate how remarkable he is. At 32 years, Skoki is now one of the Zoo's older residents and the life story of this remarkable bear should be shared — over and over and over and over. His story can teach us valuable lessons about bears — and ourselves. For me, it underlines how difficult it is to know what the best course of action is when it comes to orphaned and/or "problem" wildlife.

By early July 1996, wildlife personnel in Banff National Park had become exhausted by all the human interest in male grizzly #16 whose presence repeatedly caused "bear jams" along the roads. At eight years, he was on the cusp of adulthood. Despite his size, competition from the mature males in the area pushed him into the Bow Val-

ley, a habitat simultaneously rich with resources for a bear and compromised by the persistent, growing, human presence. After three years of uneventful encounters with humans, close encroachments by people on his personal space were challenging this easy-going bear. A few less-than-intelligent visitors used food to get his attention. GB#16 occasionally bluff charged and wildlife personnel relocated him several times to the limits of his home range. Each time, it took him only a few days to return to the ripening berries at the lower elevations of the Bow Valley.

GB#16 is a very good example of a bear whose natural disinterest in people was exemplary until people altered his responses. Their bad behaviour transformed GB#16 into a "problem" bear. Too often poor human behaviour tempts wildlife to behave in ways that are unacceptable or threatening to humans. And ... too often that bad behaviour is a death sentence for the "misbehaving" animal.

The Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project started in 1994. The project's research brought a lot of attention to grizzly bears in the region and by 1996, when GB#16 was becoming a management challenge, attitudes about bears were changing. Rather than shooting GB#16 — a common option in the past — he was moved one more time. He would be held in the security of a zoo enclosure while Parks Canada, researchers, and zoo personnel considered his future. That move was the last one for GB#16.

Else Poulsen, an extraordinary carnivore specialist, was the principal keeper responsible for GB#16 when he arrived at the Cal-



A young Skoki as photographed through a car window. PHOTO: © C. CAMPBELL



Skoki earlier this year in the Calgary Zoo. PHOTO: © E. MAK

gary Zoo — delivering food and speaking to him calmly during his first days as a locked-up animal. Else was part of a community of zoo keepers from many facilities who were convinced that enhancing zoo enclosures could mitigate the repetitive anxiety behaviour displayed by many animals living in enclosures. GB#16 responded well to Else's care and soon calmed down. He has stayed at the Calgary Zoo for the past 24 years and benefitted from the efforts to make the captive lives of zoo animals more interesting and emotionally healthy.

If GB#16 had remained in the wild and not had worrying encounters with people, he would likely have become a dominant male and bred for many years in the Eastern Slopes population. Skoki, as he was renamed, had little opportunity to breed before he was last captured. The easy-going nature he exhibited as a wild bear has served him well as a zoo animal. Now 32 years old, Skoki has apparently been a favourite at the

Colleen wrote to the Calgary Zoo on several occasions about this article. She asked the Zoo for the opportunity to interview staff about Skoki. The questions she wanted to ask included ones about Skoki's general health, whether he had any favourite treats, and how the Zoo used its grizzly and black bears to educate the public.

The Zoo declined her requests. Citing "resource challenged times," the Zoo's Director, Brand & Engagement wrote that the Zoo's "Animal Care colleagues aren't able to support an update interview on Skoki at this time."

I think the Zoo's refusal to answer a few basic questions about Skoki doesn't enhance either the Zoo's brand or its engagement.

- Ian Urquhart

Calgary Zoo since he arrived.

Had Skoki remained in the wild, would he be alive today? Probably not. Wild bears do not live to such ages except in places where they are little disturbed and where they have sufficient resources to live and breed. Wild coastal brown bears, with salmon-rich diets, have been known to live into their 30s. One coastal female died of natural causes during her 39th summer. The oldest known wild North American black bear, female #56, was part of a study in Minnesota; she also died of natural causes, age 39 years. The oldest known grizzly bear in the central Rockies was also a female who died at 34 years, apparently from fighting with another bear over an elk carcass in the spring of 1996. Her lip tattoo, "Beta," from a late 1970s study in the Cascade Valley, was discovered when she was captured by Eastern Slopes researchers in 1994. In 2008 a female polar bear at the Winnipeg Zoo died at 41 years, nearly twice as old as a female polar bear might live in the wild.

Male grizzlies in the central Rockies seldom live past 18 – 20 years.

Living in a zoo has advantages and disadvantages. Health is monitored. Ailments are treated. Food “arrives.” Shelter is available, though in summer, 2019, I watched Skoki and Khutzeymateen “muck about,” apparently indifferent to an unrelenting downpour that soaked me, even through my robust umbrella. Life in the Calgary Zoo is less risky than life in the wild; apparently now deaf, Skoki could live another 10 years as a zoo animal.

Had he remained wild, Skoki would have maintained a fairly solitary existence. As a captive animal he has learned to live in company with other bears. He and Louise (arrived at Calgary Zoo, 1980) were friends until her death well into her thirties. A former carnivore keeper told me that, when Louise became very old, Skoki sometimes followed her closely up the stairs in the grizzly enclosure, possibly to help her. He and Khutzeymateen (born at Calgary Zoo to a barren lands grizzly) are now the only adult grizzly bears at the zoo. They appear to be “friends” and are often near each other in the enclosure.

So — is Skoki wild or tame? He is neither. He has been trained to respond to the keeper’s cues for certain behaviours that make it easy to monitor his condition. And he would likely be dangerous to people if not confined. The behaviours he would have used to survive as a wild bear — foraging for the right foods in the right places at the right times, marking or reading the signs at rub trees, knowing where to dig a den and when to retreat for winter, where to cross roads or rivers — may live, long neglected, in his memory.

Was it the right decision to put Skoki in a zoo? I think Skoki is an important bear. He and Kutzeymateen and the black bears at the Calgary Zoo can be used to teach all zoo visitors and to raise awareness of the lives of zoo animals and of animals in the wild. Skoki and the other bears at the zoo help us to explore questions such as: How do lives of zoo bears and wild bears compare? How do black bears and grizzly bears differ? Why are coastal brown bears so large compared with the grizzly bears in the central Rockies? Is it natural for bears to live in such close contact with another bear

to which it is not related, especially into adult life? How long do bear families stay together and what stimulates their dispersal? Do bears become “friends” with other bears in the wild as they apparently do in zoos? What is the annual cycle for a bear? What prompts hibernation and do the zoo bears hibernate? Why or why not? What do the zoo bears teach us about hibernation physiology and hypothermia? About osteoporosis and muscle tone? About Type 2 Diabetes? How do we tell the age of bears? Why is “bear” considered an umbrella species? What other species benefit from their presence and how? What are other umbrella species? What is the story of our long relationship with bears?

Using Skoki as a foundation for teaching people about bears and how to behave when visiting in wild places may help protect other bears from being removed from their wild homes. Skoki is a magnificent animal and his legacy should benefit his wild kin. ♣

Born in Victoria Colleen has lived in Canmore since 1982. Her love of wildlife animates her art and writing.

Featured Artist Tyler Los-Jones



Aggregates no.4
Archival ink on rag paper
40.6cm x 61cm, 2018
PHOTO: © T. LOS-JONES