

The Grizzly 1999-2009

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The largest grizzly observed in Banff for decades, he enjoyed a playful rivalry with the local wolves

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The Rocky Mountain wilderness of Banff National Park is steely, unforgiving territory, an eruption of rock and ice so short of food that grizzlies here grow smaller than their coastal, salmon-chomping cousins. But one winter a decade ago, in a cramped den dug high in the treeline, a grizzly sow gave birth to a future giant. He began life, as grizzlies do, a hairless cub of just 500 g. Mother's tutelage lasted four years, longer than for bears in easier locales. Lessons dealt in the main with local geography: good spots for a meal, danger zones better missed, and how in Banff the two frequently overlap. "Bears move around the landscape in this giant pinball game," says Parks Canada carnivore specialist Mike Gibeau, "bumping into people here, bumping into people there."

He committed to memory the best places to forage for wasps, ants and, in late summer, buffalo berry (tiny, intensely sour and crucial for fattening up prior to hibernation). But his mother likely also led her son to the CP Rail tracks, where jostling hopper cars have for years spilled grain, corn and peas—irresistible candy for grizzlies. On the whole he heeded mum, and had few brushes with people (he remained untagged by park wardens and unremarked upon as a "problem" bear). When he finally set out alone and fully grown, a vast home range of 1,500 sq. km opened up before him. Wardens who did spot him described an enormous animal, as big as 270 kg, the largest in the area since the mountain parks began bear-proofing dumps and garbage bins decades ago. His paws were big as catchers' mitts, his claws—used less on flesh than for unearthing hedysarum root, glacier lily and dandelion—scythes long as knitting needles the colour of pine bark. Among Banff's 60 grizzlies, he was the dominant bear, particularly with breeding females.

His bulk allowed the bear to dominate rivals too; he was not above muscling aside fellow predators to claim their kills as his own. Even the Bow Valley wolf pack, then nine members strong, did not intimidate him. Indeed, he shadowed the pack, pilfering carcasses, at times losing

his own. The encounters could look astonishingly like play. Last year, wolf researcher Günther Bloch and wildlife photographer Peter Dettling observed the bear lumbering through spring snow, a blue T-shirt in his jaws. When a wolf saw the bear drop the garment, he raced to grab it himself, triggering an impromptu game of tag.

Days later, Bloch was in a meadow awaiting the pack—the ravens circling above an elk kill signalling the wolves were close by—when he saw the bear stroll into the clearing instead. As a group of young wolves arrived, the bear was “totally cool,” Bloch says: “No charging, no bluffing, no aggression.” That changed when Nanuk, alpha male and mate to the wolf matriarch Delinda, came. For four days the bear battled the pack, a confrontation documented by Dettling in a photo series giving a rare glimpse into an otherwise secret world: the at times ruthless, at times prankish skirmishes that define wolf-bear relations. Initially, the grizzly sat on his haunches, protecting his rear, and faced the pack, amused at the prospect of swatting all comers. But when the wolves approached in a phalanx, the bear “knew he was in trouble—you could see it in his face,” says Dettling. Standing upright—2.5 m of grizzly—he smashed his paws into the ground, generating an explosion of snow that scattered the pack. On another approach, Nanuk teased the bear, then trotted away, prompting pursuit. The tactic allowed the yearlings to attack the bear’s nearby elk kill—they emerged from the brush with bones in their mouths.

Last autumn, wardens in Yoho National Park noted the grizzly near Field, B.C., heading east along the railway tracks licking up grain spilled by passing trains, the only bear in the area not yet in hibernation. On Dec. 10, Dettling spotted him over a dead deer, a wolf standing sentinel-like in the distance. In ghostly photographs taken by remote camera in December and then again in March he can be seen ambling through underpasses beneath the Trans-Canada. Later, in May, a researcher studying railway mortalities stumbled upon the bear scavenging a carcass by the tracks. Soon after, Steve Michel, a park human-wildlife conflict specialist, was conducting an aerial elk survey when he spotted an enormous bear in a clearing beneath him. For Michel, his body language was eloquent: “I know you’re up there, but I’m not even going to bother looking.”

Such were the last sightings of the grizzly. At 1:15 a.m., on May 14, a train struck and killed him. One of Dettling’s photos, taken during his battle with the pack, captures the grizzly surrounded by three attacking wolves, a wildlife maypole dance. All four animals are now dead—struck either by cars or by a CP train.□