
Wild Times

Bear Stare



by Joe Foy

The recently-announced BC government ban on grizzly bear trophy hunting, set to begin in November 2017, was, for me, cause for celebration and reflection on past encounters with the great bear.

Back in 2002, I was in the Siwash Valley near Boston Bar doing a survey of logging within spotted owl habitat. I had parked my pickup truck at the start of a bushed-in logging road. I left my bear spray on the truck seat thinking that I would only have to walk a hundred feet or so to get a good photo of the logging across the valley. Turns out, I had to walk over a kilometre to get my shot.

On the way back, lost in my own thoughts, I was startled by a deep woofing sound. I peered through the alder shrubs and saw a brown bear to my right at the top of the road cut bank. This bear was agitated. It was woofing, snapping its jaws, tearing up dirt with its paws, then backing into the forest, then lurching forward while staring down at me.

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For my part, I spoke quietly and calmly to the bear and shuffled along the edge of the road towards my truck – which was way too far away for comfort. The bear let me pass that day – but that memory will stay with me forever.

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Once, in 1998 while being shown around the territory of the Heiltsuk Nation near the community of Bella Bella, I was privileged to be allowed to enter the site of an old big house. Deserted now in a quiet bay surrounded by big Sitka spruce trees, it had once resounded with the laughter of the families that lived there. The old house had collapsed long ago, but I could still see its massive timbers, covered in moss laying on the forest floor. Some of the huge upright poles that had held the timbers in place still stood. My guide pointed out that they were carved in the likeness of standing grizzly bears. Must have been some awesome bear stories told in that house!

A couple of years ago I was lucky to be guided down the Chilko River in Tsilhqot'in Nation territory. In the safety of the little boat I had plenty of time to identify the bears that lined the shoreline fishing for sockeye salmon – they were grizzlies!

It's easy to forget that the grizzly bear has been wiped out of much of its former range. They were once so common in California that a grizzly graces the state flag. Gone, too, from Oregon.

In BC, grizzly bears have been eliminated in the centre of the province from the US border to just north of Quesnel. Their numbers are dangerously low in the southwest, like the Siwash Valley where I had my encounter.

In the coming months more will need to be done to tighten the law and crank up its enforcement to ensure that no BC grizzlies are shot down for the fun of it any more. Let's all celebrate the end of trophy hunting and hope that future generations will always be able to recount around the campfire their own encounters with a staring grizzly.

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