

The Story of Grandfather by Brad Josephs

The great grizzlies of the North American wilderness have had a tough go since the arrival of European explorers. They have been shot, trapped, poisoned and chased almost to extinction. The remnants of the once healthy populations can be found only if you go north far enough, into the wilderness. Only in remote parts of Canada and Alaska do these creatures thrive in populations near what they used to be, as though untouched by people.

There are a few vast regions of wilderness where the bears continue to dominate the landscape. These untamed frontiers sustain so many bears that most people are afraid to venture there. During the late spring, summer and early fall, the ecosystems are bursting with a rich bounty of food, fueled by warm ocean currents and long hours of northern daylight. These places, far from any roads or towns and mostly devoid of people, are magical and wild lands on the coast of Alaska and British Columbia. They are a grizzly bear's paradise.

Severe natural forces guard the coastal regions of North America's extreme northwest. Weather systems often clash here, especially in the fall and winter, and brutal storms batter the landscape with relentless force. This is a land carved by glaciers and the runoff of heavy snowfall. With a backbone constructed by the collision of two continental plates, this is the second most volcanic region in the world, where strong earthquakes often rattle the land. This is the best place in the world to live, if you are a grizzly bear.

Here is the home of this grandfather bear, a magnificent, giant bear who has survived and prospered for almost 30 years. He has lived a full life and done everything a male bear strives to do in his life: thrive, mate, grow to great size and strength, and even have fun. He is an individual with a unique personality, and a memory loaded with years of experiences, feelings of happiness, sadness and pain. All other bears he encounters respect him, in spite of his aged condition.

As his eyes survey the pristine landscape, which looks so comfortable and familiar to him, he sees things that people cannot see. He notices subtleties that even the most experienced humans would miss. He understands tides, the timing of berry crops, the inconsistency of fish runs, the behavior of wolf packs, ravens and eagles and he can predict the weather. He is a true master of his environment.

With his extremely sensitive nose, he lives in a different dimension, one that humans will never understand. He can unravel the history of traffic on a game trail with one intake of air. He can smell other bears and animals that reside in the distance in the lightest of breezes. This incredible sense allows him and other members of his species to survive in some of the harshest places in the world. If there is food out there, he will find it.

His decisions are made after consulting finely honed instincts and rich, varied memories. He knows the pain and hardship of injury, the desperation of hunger, the thrill of killing and eating, and the obsession to procreate. He possesses the wisdom earned by surviving in one of the wildest lands on earth. Every animal in this land respects him.

During the long snowy winters he hibernates above the tree line, deep in a wild mountain range. He rests curled up in a deep den under at least 50 feet of hard packed snow. This is the same barren, wind blasted ridge where his mother gave birth to him. He still remembers when he and

his two sisters watched their mother as she relentlessly powered her way, with muscle and claw, up through the hard snow to allow them to emerge from the den at the beginning of their first spring. The three cubs scrambled out into the light for the first time and were greeted by bright sunshine and a cold strong wind. The ridge overlooked a strange and frightening world of rugged mountains and a vast blue ocean. This view and landscape would become familiar to him in the years to come, but for the time being, all that mattered to the three cubs was their mother.

After a few weeks staying near the den, nursing and playing and learning to walk, run and fight, the family headed down the mountain into the rich river deltas. Here the world was wet and lush and held a million intense smells. They grazed on young sedge grass that was sweet and plentiful. During low tides they walked out on the tidal flats where she taught them how to dig for razor clams - the cub's first taste of meat. Each step of the way, their mother was devoted to her children. She kept them safe, encouraged them to play, provided them with milk, and patiently taught them what to eat and how to get it.

The world seemed overwhelmingly complicated to the cubs. Their mother was constantly making tough decisions, weighing the risk of getting close to other potentially dangerous bears with the reward of obtaining food. She would spend minutes sniffing the air or the ground, thinking about the data retrieved by her snout.

As the cubs grew older and stronger during that first summer their mother became more and more bold, bringing them right into the middle of the groups of bears who began congregating near the river mouth. At first the cubs weren't sure what was in the river, so preferred the meadow, but the sedges were turning brown and were no longer soft, sweet and filling.

One July morning as the sun rose over a calm, whispering ocean, the family was resting at the riverbank watching a young female wade through the water. All at once the bear stood on her hind legs to see better, then dropped to all fours and sprinted through the river. She leapt and crashed through the water. Suddenly she froze and carefully submerged her head. When her dripping face emerged her jaws were grasping a giant, silvery chum salmon. The wind blew the scent of the bleeding fish right into the bear family and they were suddenly charged with a hypnotic focus. The salmon had arrived!

Their mother was a skilled, experienced fisher and within minutes she was heading back to shore with a struggling fish in her jaws. The cubs watched patiently as their mother tore into the oily flesh. She ate almost the entire fish in several powerful bites before charging back into the water. The cubs scrambled furiously to collect the remains of their mother's fish. Soon she returned to shore with another. The feeling of pleasure that came from a belly full of the rich meat would become the driving force of the young bear's life and the key to his growth and survival.

She taught them when to run. Other bears, especially the giant dark males, were feared the most. Packs of wolves got her attention as well. But most of all she was terrified of people. On three occasions that first summer the bear family encountered these strange beings. Once commercial fisherman came ashore to comb the beach, and twice floatplanes arrived carrying fishermen. Each time the bears ran at their first appearance, and didn't stop for more than a mile.

As a cub, he received three years of dedication, sacrifice and education from his devoted mother. She taught him everything he needed to know to thrive in this wilderness: what to eat and how

to find it, when to run from danger and when to face it. She taught him how to intimidate other animals, and when to avoid confrontation. Her rich milk provided him with nutrients that helped him grow fast and strong. Five times she fiercely fought male bears for her cubs' protection, and twice sustained serious injuries. The investment in her young was well rewarded.

When he was a juvenile on his own he watched the mating rituals of the older bears intently, and catalogued every behavior. He practiced and perfected his fighting techniques with other young males for several years before his maturity. When he was ready he performed well and swayed many females during the green months of spring. As he got older he learned which females were the most successful mothers, and concentrated his efforts on them, when they were ready to mate. He sometimes followed them for weeks across the mountains. His has spread his genes far and wide over the last 25 years.

Although surviving has been a challenge, the land has been good to this great bear, and has always produced enough for him to survive, even in his old age. Several times he was presented with bountiful opportunities. One spring when he was young and barely making it through the year, a dead whale had washed up on the shore. Numbed by hunger, and exhausted of fat reserves, he detected the scent from several miles away. At first the scent seemed like a mirage, but the reality of it relieved and excited him. Several bears had already found the whale, but they allowed him to eat his fill for many days. He was able to gain a buffer of fat reserves that sustained him until the salmon began running.

His behavior has also been good for the land, and helps to keep the ecosystem alive. He has helped by leaving fish scraps after feeding, and defecating on the riverside, fertilizing the forests that shade and feed the young generations of salmon. He has also cleaned up the streams of decaying, post-spawned salmon, helping to keep the waters healthy. Without bears, productivity of this land would greatly diminish.

Possibly the most valuable aspect of this old bear, and other wild bears, is that they symbolize wilderness in its most untamed form. The grizzly is the first to threaten and confront humans when they try to settle or alter a landscape, and therefore, the first to lose. A population of grizzlies immediately defines an area as pristine. Without the grizzlies the wilderness loses its character and its soul. Like a river without fish, a town without people, the wild mountains and forests of the Northwest would be empty and sad without them.

This great bear has been able to withstand long winters, fierce autumn storms, berry crop failures, brutal battles with other bears and journeys over the rugged mountain ranges. He has seemed almost indestructible in his years in the north country. The one force that he and other bears are powerless and vulnerable against is the human race. He fears humans, and they fear him, and so far he has been lucky to avoid confrontation. He has been hunted on several occasions, but has eluded the human predators through wisdom and caution. The crown jewel of the land still roams those distant, foggy mountains, getting bigger, stronger and wiser every day.

Unfortunately the future for bears is tenuous, even in their last wilderness retreats. Threats from loss of habitat, over-hunting and the health of salmon runs are all very real. The bears of the southern Rockies were once thought of as impervious to eradication, but they are all gone now. Only when these great bears gain the respect and admiration that they deserve from us, will we be able to protect them from the powerful destructive forces of our own species.

Note by Chris Morgan

To me, this beautiful drawing of a wise old grandfather Alaskan brown bear evokes so many thoughts about these breathtaking creatures. Powerful and resilient, versatile and determined, exceptionally tuned into the places they call home. I've learned a lot about life from them over the years, and the ways in which humans relate to *their* natural environment. You can't help but start thinking like a bear when you're in bear country, and that's something that's good for all of us. Whenever I'm among the giant coastal bears in Alaska I ponder on their cousins in Europe - smaller versions of exactly the same species, clinging on to survival, precariously dotted in the last wild places of that continent. But there are seven other bear species too - ranging from the high Andes to the Himalayas, and from the rainforests of Borneo to the ice of the arctic. Giant pandas are the rarest - there may only be 1600 in the wild. American black bears are the most numerous - around 650,000 remain in North America. Together, the eight bear species of the world cover about one third of the earth's land surface, so by protecting them, we protect so much more. There are countless people and organizations working for bears and their habitats globally - get to know them - they are doing incredible work for all of us. For more about Wildlife Media's work to save the planet, one bear species at a time, please visit www.BEARTREK.org to learn about our movie and campaign. Thank you.

Chris Morgan
Ecologist & Conservationist

P.S. See our latest bear conservation product at Wildlife Media:

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