

## *A Grizzly Education.*



We were greeted at the B-Bar Ranch by a gourmet lunch buffet and a life-sized statue of a grizzly bear. The B-Bar is a 9,000-acre (3600-hectare) ranch in the Tom Miner Basin, on the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park. Unlike many ranches, the B-Bar is a wildlife-friendly place, where the elk, moose, bears and wolves wander at will. I can attest to this generosity personally. On a subsequent visit, I spooked a herd of more than 100 elk, which thundered past me like a herd of feral mustangs. The next day, on a short walk out behind the main building, I almost stepped on a chocolate brown grizzly bear hiding in the sagebrush hunting elk calves. I just about shit my pants. While I froze statue-still, he leapt up and ran 200 metres to the nearest copse of trees

with the speed of a thoroughbred. All I saw was a bear ass for about 10 seconds and then he disappeared, as if the whole incident were nothing more than a dream.

The B-Bar is also a Friend of the Earth, allowing environmentalists like Willcox to host events that help to protect bears and other wildlife. Willcox had arranged for several biologists to come and educate us on the biology and status of grizzly bears in western North America. Some were independent experts concerned about the future of grizzly bears, such as Paul Paquet, Michael Proctor and Lance Craighead – the son of one of the famous Craighead brothers, who pioneered grizzly-bear research in Yellowstone. At least one participant worked for the government; he had come under cover of darkness to tell us what he knew. Conspicuously absent was Chris Servheen, who has coordinated grizzly bear recovery for the US government for almost 30 years. It seems he and Willcox have something of a feud going. I couldn't help feeling like there was a conspiracy afoot and

that we were being groomed to blow it wide open.

The biologists' job was to present their research and use their professional judgment to fill the many gaps that exist in what we know about grizzly bears. The picture was rather bleak. Grizzly bears roamed most of North America until 250 years ago. Since the arrival of white men, with poison and increasingly lethal rifles, grizzly bear range has shrunk north and west. By 1930, the Great Bear had been relegated to little islands of mountainous habitat in the western US, a thin sliver of western Alberta, BC, and the Canadian North. Today, Alberta's grizzly population has dwindled to less than 700; BC hosts about 15,000; and Nunavut, the Yukon and Northwest Territories harbour fewer than 10,000.

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) is one island of grizzly habitat. Anchored at the centre by the world's first national park, the GYE is also home to a growing number of loggers, hunters, snowmobilers, ranchers, tourists and second-home owners. By 1975, when all grizzlies

in the lower 48 states were listed as endangered, the Yellowstone grizzly bear population had dropped to a mere 200 animals. With the full force of the Endangered Species Act behind them, environmentalists forced the US Fish & Wildlife Service to do a better job of ensuring a future for Yellowstone's grizzly bears. Now there are more than 600 grizzlies in the GYE, so the United States government wants to declare success and take the Yellowstone grizzly off the endangered species list. Willcox thinks otherwise, and she is encouraging the environmental community and anyone else she can convince to oppose delisting at all costs. Which is why, of course, we are here.

Most of the biologists didn't express an opinion either way, but they did seem to think that from a biological point of view there are plenty of problems to iron out before the population can be declared recovered. There is concern that some of the grizzlies' primary food sources in Yellowstone are at risk of disappearing in the very near future, particularly white-bark pine nuts and cutthroat trout. Other concerns

are that the population might still be too small, which puts it at risk of inbreeding, or that climate change would fundamentally change the nature of the landscape. Willcox is convinced that without the protection of the Endangered Species Act, humans will become too damn lethal again. In addition, several other populations on the US–BC border are precariously small, isolated and in desperate need of some attention from the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

By the end of the day, I couldn't help but wonder what the hell the US government was thinking. While a threefold increase in bears seems pretty damn impressive, the list of problems still on the table seems inordinately long. As I helped myself to my third plate of smoked salmon and another glass of the peppery cabernet, it seemed to me that we had done a pretty good job of managing our grizzly bears in Canada. Perhaps we needed to come down and show them how to get the job done.

The next morning I ate my words, or at least my thoughts, for breakfast. It was Brian Horejsi's turn to speak and what he had to say

shocked me more than what I had heard the day before. Brian is an outspoken grizzly-bear biologist from Alberta, of all places. In fact, he lives less than 100 kilometres from my house, which by Canadian standards is just around the corner. I had travelled all the way to Yellowstone to learn the truth about grizzly bears at home.

The gist was this: do not count on Canadian grizzly bears to cross the border and buoy up US populations. If anything, grizzly bears are probably moving from the US, where they are protected, into Canada, where they are being recklessly killed and mismanaged. In fact, he said, Alberta likely has fewer grizzly bears than Montana or Wyoming and the population is in deep trouble.

On the plane ride home, I watched what was left of Grizzly Country scroll by beneath me like a filmstrip. I couldn't help but think about the grizzly sow and her three cubs, fighting for survival in one of the *safest* places to be a grizzly bear in all of North America. If what I had heard were true, things were much worse

in Canada. Clear-cuts, roads, seismic lines, oil wells, gas pipelines and rednecks with ATVs and guns are making it all but impossible for grizzly bears to eke out a living in the forests, foothills and alpine meadows that we haven't yet taken away from them. They are dying of collisions with trucks and trains, gunshot wounds and poison faster than they can reproduce. We are pushing them out of every place where our hard work and ingenuity has discovered something valuable, like coal, hot springs or cattle-supporting grass. More than 100 years after we invented the concepts of "protected areas" and "wildlife conservation," the overheated engine of techno-industrial Progress is still driving the bears north and west like cattle. And now, whether I liked it or not, I felt obligated to do something about it.