

GRIZZLY BEAR #16

a.k.a. SKOKI

a brief biography of a bear
born wild,
collared and numbered by researchers
victimized by passers-by
and, finally, named by a zoo keeper

(Story by Colleen Campbell, April 1997)

In late January 1988, the central Rockies had settled into a typical midwinter period of high pressure which brought crisp, clear, cold weather. The lengthening days were more obvious because of the incessant blue skies and, in the darkness of some of the carefully excavated dens high on the slopes, grizzly sows, only slightly awake, were bearing their tiny young. Like all newly born grizzly bear cubs, the cub to become GB #16 weighed about a pound and was nearly bald. Though his eyes were closed, though his hearing and sense of smell were still undeveloped and though his mouth had no teeth, this weak, demanding little creature was able to find his mother's nipples, to nurse and stay warm for the remainder of the seasonal hibernation.

For the next few years he lived exclusively with his mother and other surviving siblings, learning what he needed to survive in a hazardous world. From his parent he learned when and where to dig for Hedysarum (Northern Sweetvetch) roots; where the Equisetum (horsetail) could be found fresh and young; how to locate and eat carrion; where to cross rivers, roads and railways; and who and what to avoid in his environment. And, typically, sometime during his third or fourth summer, he and his siblings were rejected by the female. She was ready to breed again.

In adolescence — the two to four years between living in the company of the sow and reaching breeding status — a bear is vulnerable. An adolescent bear has no established status and all the learning it has accumulated is frequently tested.

During the summer of 1993, the adolescent bronze-coloured male was relegated by his immaturity and life experience, and possibly by the difficult summer season, to grazing in the lower Bow Valley. This valley is also the route of the Trans Canada Highway, the Bow Valley Parkway and the Canadian Pacific Railway, all well-used transportation routes. The young bear, one of the small number of resident grizzlies in the lower Bow Valley, shared his 'place' with cars, semi tractor trailer trucks, trains and a yearly count of several millions of tourists. In the wet and cold summer of 1993, even the usually productive habitat of the lower Bow had a limited berry crop. Grizzly Bear #16 foraged habitually between Banff and Castle Junction.

Like people, bears have a personal range of comfort when encountering others. Typically, bears will avoid humans or act with indifference. Every bear, though, is unique and behaviours differ. Grizzly Bear #16 is dauntless; he proved to be somewhat indifferent to humans, — not fearful.

Initially, Grizzly Bear #16 was also disinterested in food from 'unidentified human remains': picnic leavings, campground refuse, regular garbage and grain spills common along the railroad tracks. He ate berries from *Shepherdia canadensis* (Canadian buffaloberry) which lines the highway verges; his mere presence was enough to stop traffic.

Park wardens and researchers became aware of the young grizzly about halfway through that cold rainy summer when the grizzly was impassively causing traffic hazards on both highways in the lower Bow. This bear was occasionally visible to automobile passengers; this bear was not a problem animal. It was during this summer that the young Grizzly bear was trapped and radio-collared – and became known as GB #16.

Researchers, wardens and volunteers worked very hard during the summer and autumn of 1993, monitoring the bear and trying to aversively condition him to human presence. Aversive conditioning of Grizzly Bear #16 involved the use of deterrents — rubber bullets or cracker shells — to cause him to associate discomfort with human presence. In 1993 he was relatively indifferent to humans; when approached to within about 50 metres, his tendency was to move slowly but imperatively away.

Grizzly Bear #16 survived the first summer of encounters with humans. The lower Bow Valley was a major part of his home range and over the next few summers he fed frequently along the verge of the Trans-Canada or the Bow Valley Parkway. Increasingly, people stopped their vehicles. Slowly, Grizzly Bear #16 learned that these creatures – humans – are apparently harmless.

At times, the bear's attempts to cross a road were impaired by excessive numbers of humans blocking his manoeuvres. In spite of efforts to protect Grizzly Bear #16, during the following summers he was exposed to thousands of people, many of them leaving their vehicles to approach him for a better look or to photograph him. Though his personal space was considerably shrunk by regular exposure to humans, #16 did not become overly defensive until 1996.

A bear's focus during the summer season is to avoid bigger, possibly dangerous bears and to eat. The biological drive is to consume food, gathering enough energy to sleep through the winter without waking for any reason, and to become large enough to eventually compete for a mate. The balance of energy gained to energy spent is seasonal. Gathering food is done, always, in the easiest, most energy-efficient way. Food from human sources is 'easy gain' for a bear.

At some time during summers in the Bow Valley, Grizzly Bear #16 was introduced to food from human sources. Wardens and researchers found remnants of sandwiches and other human-sourced foods on the roadside after breaking up car jams. A researcher witnessed a camper throwing an apple to #16 in the campground at Lake Louise.

Bears are intelligent animals and they learn easily; Grizzly Bear #16 began to associate humans with food. With the association came changes in his behaviour. People were approaching him more closely and threatening his personal limits. His attitude to humans turned to boldness, perhaps intolerance. He was defending his personal space.

During the summer of 1996, Grizzly Bear #16 passed periodically through the campground at Lake Louise, one night tripping on and tearing a tent. He passed through the town of Field; some mornings he passed by the back door of Laggan's Mountain Bakery in Lake Louise, reportedly sticking his head in the door on one occasion. During the previous winter about 500 pounds of grain spill from the highway were dumped in a pit in the home range of #16 and by summer the dump of nicely fermented grain was attracting #16 to feed.

Over the course of that same summer Grizzly Bear #16 became a *'victimized animal'. Associations of humans with food were firmly reinforced. Grizzly Bear #16 was reported to have (at least) approached people on the side of the road, likely in anticipation of being fed. Eventually, he bluff-charged two vehicles, interpreted as an overtly aggressive behaviour but also possible defensive of his space.

The potential hazard of an antagonistic reaction by #16 to a human on foot was compounded by his association of humans with food. It is possible that this conditioning, haphazardly orchestrated by every person who approached him over the years, led him to approaching people. Parks managers were unprepared to risk such a probable encounter; Grizzly Bear #16 could not be trusted simply to abandon the area if a human approached him.

In July of 1996, the bear was relocated from the Bow Valley, north to a back-country area where researchers could track him from the air. Within a few days, though, he returned the Bow Valley. For a short time he survived without interference, but his next 'infraction' led to being tranquilized and relocated again — this time to isolation at the Calgary Zoo.

The initial plan was to find a zoo home for #16 somewhere else in the world. The decision to keep #16 at the Calgary Zoo depended on him accommodating to and living peacefully with the two resident brown bears, Louise and Khutzeymateen. After his capture he was given an opportunity to calm down; he learned quickly to associate his 'keeper' with food and care. He then met the bears, who would be his life companions, through a barricade that discouraged direct and unpredictable encounters. True to the character he had displayed as a free and wild bear, he learned easily to accept the new conditions of his life.

When he was captured, Grizzly Bear #16 was on the cusp of maturity, of becoming a breeding male. As a surviving mature animal, his genes would have been secure in the wild population and he would have yielded valuable information to the research of wild grizzly bears in the central Canadian Rockies.

Neutered and living in a zoo, Grizzly Bear #16 is *dead* to the wild population of bears from which he came. As a zoo animal, Grizzly Bear #16 *is* of value to the wild populations as an important example. His story impresses us with the importance of leaving wild animals to their wildness; it teaches us to avoid contributing to the habituation that leads to removal of wild animals from their natural environment, natural behaviours and reproductive patterns.

* A ‘VICTIMIZED’ animal is any wild animal which has succumbed to temptations offered or left unintentionally by people. The dog food on the back porch may attract coyotes or a bear — or only ravens or crows. The garbage we leave poorly contained, or the grease or jam we leave spilled on a picnic table all attracts the attention of animals. Animals then learn to associate food with people and become habituated through sheer sloppiness in our own behaviour. The animals are responding to the biological quest for food. ‘PROBLEM ANIMAL’ is the term most frequently, but incorrectly applied to such casualties. ‘Problem animal’ implies that the situation was initiated by the wild animal; it is the humans who are problematic.

June 26, 2006

Skoki is still resident at the Calgary Zoo. He gets along well with the other two grizzly bears, both females, and is particularly caring of Louise, the oldest of the three, Skoki is now 18 years old, and this spring weighed about 840 pounds. In the wild, he would be past his prime as a dominant male, would possibly still be alive, but at risk of being wounded in conflict with younger more fit males. In the zoo, he may live another 20 years in good health.

It is important to keep the story of how Skoki became a captive bear alive. We should continue to learn from his story. The best place for a healthy bear is in the wild.