

A visit to the far north-western corner of British Columbia

Every morning at Grizzly Camp I rose around 0700 for breakfast and was out at one of the bear viewing spots by 0830. This may sound late for watching wildlife, but there were bears everywhere, so it didn't affect either the quantity or the quality of the bears I saw. Some days were better than others, of course, and overall evenings were probably best, but each day brought new and excellent sightings.

Just to sit out on the deck with a coffee (or maybe, in the early evening, a beer!), listening to the river and watching a bear amble past totally unconcerned by my presence, looking for an easy salmon catch, was an extraordinary privilege. A piece of 'wild' that felt almost unreal - something from a bygone age that simply shouldn't happen in the 21st century! Yet I spent four full days watching this drama play out in front of me.

In addition to watching bears from the deck, I alternated between two spots further upriver each day. Cameras and binoculars in hand, I would sit patiently with a knowledgeable bear guide just a couple of metres from a bear trail. Mum, Tom, Little Tom, Ozzy and Sunshine were all regular visitors and not one seemed in the slightest perturbed by me looking on as they ambled past, jumped in the water to fish for salmon, played and sparred.

Sunshine, a smallish, blonde and beautiful four-year-old, was the undisputed star of the show - her coquettish good looks and twinkling eye capable of melting even the hardest of hearts. Finding a largish salmon by the side of the river, she took some time to chomp through it before approaching the deck to sniff opportunistically at what was cooking on the barbecue for lunch, her nose just a few centimetres from the grill - as if she owned it!

On realizing that the sizzling salmon steaks were for our lunch rather than hers, she headed to a small tree no more than three metres away and rubbed and scratched to her heart's content for some ten minutes. First she rubbed her back to and fro, then her bottom, then stood up and while hugging the tree rubbed the top of her head, followed by her cheeks and nose. That done, she turned around, leaned against the tree and - Jungle Book-style - rubbed her back up and down by bending and straightening her knees. Then, leaving her dotting audience behind, she wandered off upriver to find another salmon. This scene was played out daily - sometimes more than once a day.

The camp's strict protocol allows you to sit alongside a bear trail as long as you don't walk on it and so imprint it with human scent. One morning I sat by the fast-running river a couple of metres from a 15-metre long fallen tree that lay parallel to river and formed part of a well-trodden bear trail. It had been fairly quiet with only a few distant sightings, but just as I prepared to move to another spot a radio call announced that Sunshine was heading upriver on my side.

She appeared a few moments later, picking her way along the riverbank and out onto the gravel spit where I sat. Instead of following the trail along the fallen tree, she altered her route to pass between me and the tree, slowing to cast a sideways glance at me, before climbing onto the tree and continuing on her way. A bear with a cool sense of humour!

From my vantage point - below the eye-level of a fully grown female grizzly at a distance of barely half a metre - this was one of life's more humbling experiences. But Sunshine is not to be messed with. She's a truly wild bear that lives in a truly wild place, a protected area of some five million acres, criss-crossed with streams rich with spawning salmon, accessible only by air, and visited by only a few people each year. This is her home, and we visit on her terms.

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