

Hungry as a bear

Yukon grizzlies fattening up for winter know where to go for a late autumn feast: the Fishing Branch, a tributary of the Porcupine River, whose warm waters create a rich microclimate for spawning salmon

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN J. KRAEMANN



Wildlife stories of the year

The Ni'iinlii Njik (Fishing Branch) Ecological Reserve is part of the 6,500-square-kilometre Fishing Branch Protected Area, which includes First Nations and public lands and is managed by the Vuntut Gwitchin and Yukon governments.



EARLY ONE MORNING in early October, bear guide Phil Timpany and I wade across the waist-deep Fishing Branch to hike to a grizzly den. It's a steep climb. The area around the entrance has been cleared of moss and twigs, and all the nearby spruce trees have their lower branches broken off, no doubt by the den's owner preparing a soft bed for a long winter's sleep. The entrance tunnel slopes slightly upward into the cave, perfect for trapping body heat and allowing moisture to escape. I crawl in. It's cozy, safe from any weather. Inside, in a chamber the size of a small travel trailer, is a depression that has been lined knee-deep with chewed twigs, tree limbs, mosses and grasses. It's a bear-sized mattress.



In the first weeks of November, this cave — and others nearby — will be occupied. The females go in first. Later, snow will drift over the openings, sealing the bears and the entrances until spring.

But before they snuggle into their dens, the grizzlies will gather for their own Thanksgiving feast. That's what I've come to witness. I've flown by helicopter almost two hours from Dawson, in northwestern Yukon, to photograph them in the 170-square-kilometre Ni'iinlii Njik (Fishing Branch) Ecological Reserve, which straddles the Arctic Circle. (Ni'iinlii Njik is Gwitchin for "where fish spawn.") Timpany, who travels with his elkhound Smokey and has been working with these bears for 18 years, is my host. In partnership with the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, he has formed a wildlife-viewing company to fly in small groups of visitors

In search of a late-fall, protein-rich meal, a ravenous grizzly (PREVIOUS PAGES) stalks the Fishing Branch in the Yukon's Ogilvie Mountains. One of the peaks in the range is Bear Cave Mountain (ABOVE), whose Gwitchin name means "rock den." It is riddled with limestone caves that grizzlies line with vegetation (LEFT) to cushion a long winter's hibernation. The Fishing Branch (ABOVE) winds along the valley at the base of the mountain.





The entrance to the spacious hibernation cave (LEFT), whose interior is pictured on the previous pages, will eventually fill with snow, sealing it and protecting its inhabitant from the ravages of a Yukon winter. Its mouth stained with the blood of its last meal, a grizzly (RIGHT) searches the river for its next appetizer.

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(no more than four per day) to observe this rare gathering of inland grizzlies feasting on chum salmon on the Fishing Branch, one of three major tributaries which flow from the Ogilvie Mountains to form the Porcupine River.

Being here is like living my grandfather's dream. He settled around the Great Lakes, but all his life, he subscribed to *The Alaska Sportsman* and dreamed of seeing the Far North. For the past 30 years, I've done that, travelling the North from its bog-laden tundra to its towering peaks.

Today, I've landed in a most magical place. Bulging rocky peaks, called tors, rise from the Fishing Branch on the south face of Bear Cave Mountain, known locally as Ch'ii Ch'à'an, Gwitchin for "rock den." This is a karst landscape, honeycombed with limestone that has been dissolved over the years by water. That ongoing geological process has created unusual surface and subsurface features — sinkholes, disappearing streams, springs, complex underground drainage systems and caves, including the ancient caves where the bears hibernate. There are more than 20 hibernation caves within Bear Cave Mountain.

What attracts the grizzlies are chum salmon, which enter Alaska from the Bering Sea, swim upstream along the Yukon River, turn north up the Porcupine River, then west into the upper reaches of the Fishing Branch. Spawning salmon are drawn here by waters that well up into the river from the karst subsurface. Those waters are highly oxygenated and remain at a constant annual temperature, which means this section of the river doesn't freeze and the bears can feed later into the season.

A ravenous physical state of increased appetite drives 30 to 50 grizzlies to make an annual trek to this riverine cul-de-sac. These are wild, wary grizzlies, and their gathering is linear, rather than congregational. They forage along a 12-kilometre stretch of the Fishing Branch, overlapping one another upstream and downstream: big bear displaces medium-sized bear, which displaces smaller bear, and so on.

I'm staying with Timpany in a Yukon-government-owned camp that consists of a main cabin, a guide cabin, three sleeping cabins, an outhouse and an elevated storage cache. This





Grizzlies will fish three to four times a day during daylight hours (LEFT) and eat three to five salmon at every session, if they can catch them. Bald eagles (RIGHT), wolves (BELOW) and ravens all scavenge grizzly leftovers and attempt to catch fish themselves.

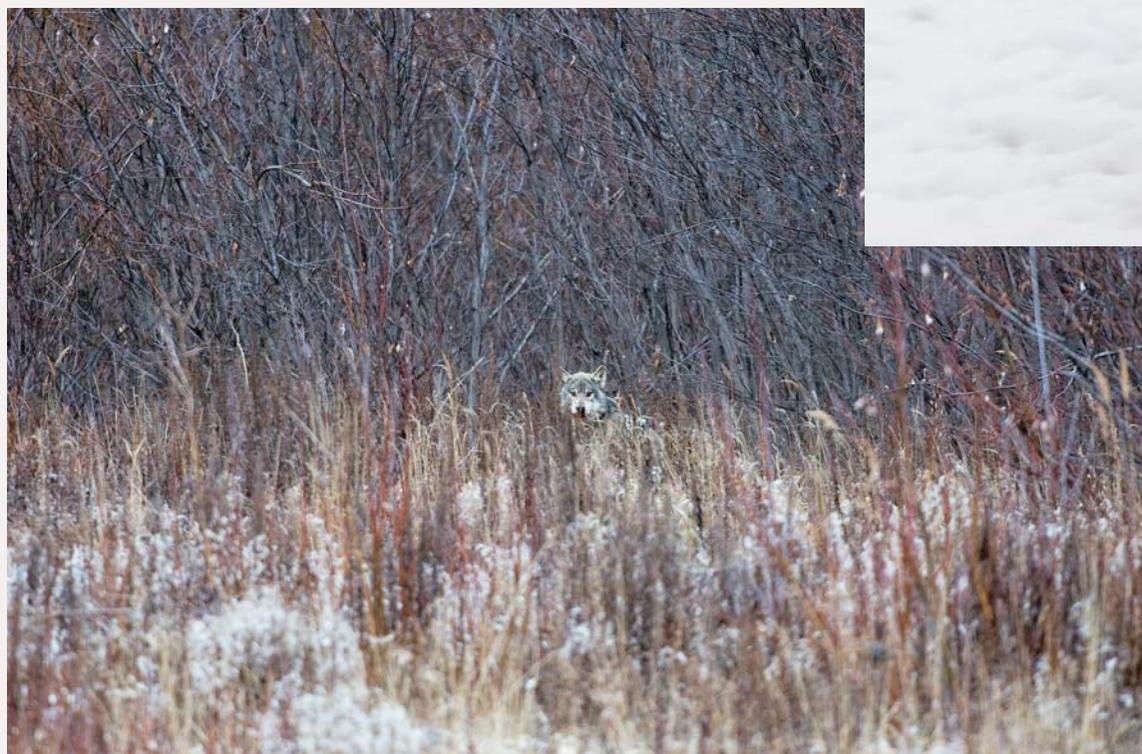
is my third season here, and I'm determined to capture this rarely seen ursine behaviour with my lens — and my memory. Every day, I go to my place on the river and tuck myself down and wait, letting time pass and hoping a bear will appear. Sometimes, bears walk close by. Sometimes, they smell me and circle around and behind, carrying on with their fishing once safely past. I keep a low profile, shifting my shape by hunkering in a clump of willow and wearing quiet forest colours. The slightest movement exposes me to the more wary bears, causing them to shrink into the trees.

While waiting and watching, I think about my grandfather. He never made it to the North, but he would have loved Bear Cave Mountain. I recall one of his expressions, from when we first went deer hunting together. He would place me near a game trail in the forest and say, "Stand here as long as you can, then stand a little longer." I've been doing that all my life.

I AWAKE AT 6 A.M. to a cold cabin. My head has been out of my sleeping bag, and my moustache has beads of condensation from my breathing. I light a fire in the wood stove and 15 minutes later, oh, the wood heat feels so good, doubly so because all my thermal clothes are now warm as I put them on. I dress leisurely, rather than quickly throwing on enough clothes to warm up, and the act of getting dressed itself generates some warmth.

I visit the outhouse, then enjoy two cups of hot coffee while keeping an eye out for bears. They come around in the pre-dawn, then wander off to sleep until midday.

I fall into a daily routine of waking before dawn, followed by coffee, cereal and readying cameras by 9 o'clock, then



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A grizzly sow and three yearling cubs that will den with her this winter are drawn to an ice-free stretch of the Fishing Branch (PREVIOUS PAGES). Wildlife-viewing tourists staying at the Yukon-government cabins along the river (ABOVE) quickly learn to be alert for grizzlies passing through the camp (LEFT).

standing along the river for hours. As the days close and the light fades, I start thinking of food. Timpany is a good cook — bannock and blueberry pancakes are his specialties.

One day, before returning to the cabin, we stare down the river one more time. A wolf darts out from the willows and into the river, grabs a large salmon behind the head and, just as quickly, runs back into the willows with its flapping meal. After eating, it pokes its head out and peers our way before vanishing around the river bend. It's a burst of excitement on a very slow day.

As the evening twilight starts to make me imagine shapes in the dimness, we hear a grunt, followed by another. A bull moose saunters onto the gravel bar. Its antlers are easily visible as it tilts them back and forth, walking across the river, then being absorbed by the forest, grunts fading to quiet.

AT THIS TIME OF YEAR (late September, early October), the skies are mainly overcast. The blessing of good light is infrequent. Another evening just after sunset, as we are ready to give up, I spot a bear rounding a distant willow clump on the river. It walks past us in post-sunset light, with a backdrop of mountain-reflected golden water.

Nearly every day, my vigil is punctuated by whiskey-jacks caching pieces of flesh from half-eaten salmon carcasses abandoned by grizzly bears. Occasionally, something less common trundles by — a marten or a moose. One day, I watch a pack of wolves stalking three bear cubs while their mother fishes

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Near the camp, a subadult grizzly (LEFT) leaves his scent on one of the rubbing trees that the bears mark when they pass through. A mother plunges into the river to snatch a salmon (BELOW), while her cub watches from shore. Guide Phil Timpany films a passing bear family (BOTTOM LEFT) that appears undisturbed by his presence.



on the opposite bank. But usually, it's just me, alone with the trees and sky and mountains and the ever-moving river.

On the darkest morning of all, an icy fog sits atop the entire mountain. The second cup of coffee tastes good. The daylight has diminished fast in the past two weeks, and winter is waiting in the wings. When I had arrived, I was starting to photograph at 9:00 or 9:30 in the morning; now it's 10:30 before there's enough daylight, and the sun sets below the mountain at 4:30.

The river's level has also gone down, the salmon run has peaked, and the bears are moving more slowly each day. They look plump and ready to curl up for a long sleep.

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