



# YOU SEE A PREDATOR. HE SEES A PRODUCT.

Most people's instinct when they see a bear is to bolt or shake in their boots. **Not Phil Timpany.** The North's leading provider of grizzly bear viewing opportunities brings customers up close and personal with one of the most feared animals in the world. And he's making a killing.

STORY BY VIVIAN BELIK · PHOTOS BY MARTIN RUDLOF

It's three o'clock in the morning and I'm startled from a deep sleep by the sound of a 600-pound grizzly bear rubbing itself against my cabin. The thin plywood siding, inches from my face, is shaking from the weight of the heaving bear. I'm alone and my heart is racing. I instinctively wrap my fingers around the air horn beside my bed and wait. After a few seconds, the rumbling subsides and I hear the bear trundle off into the bush with hardly a sound. I catch my breath before drifting off to sleep again.

"Did you peek out the window and see which bear it was?" Phil Timpany asks me the next day, between bites of scrambled eggs and bacon.

Timpany, who looks to be in his late 50s (he won't

say), is dressed in his trademark short-sleeve button-up shirt and ball cap, though it's 7:30 in the morning and chilly. His question isn't meant to be facetious: Timpani has been working with bears since the 1970s, and he still vibrates when he talks about the grizzlies that visit his remote camp, located on a tributary of the Yukon's Taku River, just south of the Yukon-B.C. border.

Timpany can rattle off the names and personality quirks of most of the bears that frequent his site, a collection of cabins and walking trails guarded by staff members armed with rifles and two-way radios. Considering there are nearly 50 different grizzlies roaming the camp – a number that continues to grow each year – Timpany's intimate knowledge of all his neighbours is impressive.



ABOVE: Timpany's Nakina Adventures camp (located somewhere south of the Yukon border, in northern B.C.) attracts a different kind of shooter. TOP RIGHT: Bears playing cute: a common sight at the camp. BOTTOM RIGHT: Fearing encroachment upon his bears, Timpany keeps the precise location of Nakina a well-kept secret.

The French, German, Australian and American tourists who visit Nakina Adventures – or its sister camp, Bear Cave Mountain Eco-Adventures, which Timpany runs from within the central Yukon's Fishing Branch Territorial Park – are there to net plump chinook salmon and get a glimpse of one of the most revered and feared animals in North America: the grizzly. But they may as well be there for Timpany himself. The veteran bear guide, sporting a tireless, impish grin, has a true knack for storytelling, entertaining guests for hours with tales of his time staking out polar bears and grizzlies in isolated outposts across the North while working alongside world-renowned photographers and filmmakers. Measured against Timpany, the bears are almost secondary.

THE NAKINA ADVENTURES CAMP, where I visited in August, is nestled in a lush valley accessible only by helicopter. Thousands of spawning salmon run up the Taku River each August. The remote location and abundance of fish and berries make it a perfect stopover

for bears looking to fatten up. In fact, the area attracts so many grizzlies throughout August that guests (typically 50 a year, from August to October) are usually guaranteed to see a bear within 20 minutes of arriving. And over the course of their four-day stay, they'll likely have taken in more than 100 grizzly sightings, some from as close as three or four feet.

The experience is so surreal that just trying to describe the camp to friends and family is a challenge, says Sharyl Siegel, a retiree from Tucson, Arizona. Her husband, Rob, has revisited the Nakina camp for the last 20 years. "What people don't understand is that you feel like you've just been sitting in the middle of a *National Geographic* magazine for a week seeing everything in its most natural state."

There are an estimated 10,000 to 14,000 grizzly bears scattered across the three territories, and yet there are only a handful of grizzly-viewing outfitters in the North, compared to a dozen in British Columbia alone. Alaska is the reigning pan-Arctic heavyweight, with 14 commercial bear-viewing companies and 10 state-run wildlife preserves and sanctuaries.

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“You feel like you’ve just been sitting in the middle of a *National Geographic* magazine for a week.” REPEAT GUEST SHARYL SIEGEL  
 “When you see those little cubs, you just want to pick them up, but you know it would be like grabbing a spinning lawnmower.” HER HUSBAND, ROB

It’s big business. Two years ago, half of all tourists to Alaska sought out wildlife viewing experiences, spending \$2.1 billion for the privilege. By comparison, in 2012, only 39 per cent of tourists to the Yukon engaged in

wildlife viewing. Bear Cave Mountain – where Timpany’s guests pay \$1,750 a day to watch grizzlies, compared to \$1,300 at Taku River – is the only operation of its kind in the Yukon. “The Yukon hasn’t caught up,” says Timpany.

The dearth of bear-viewing hot spots north of 60 represents a lost tourism opportunity, according to Timpany, who is based in Whitehorse. “The demand around the world is growing exponentially. In the North – in B.C. and the Yukon specifically – the public and the government have a hard time wrapping their heads around the idea that wildlife viewing is a business that can be taken advantage of on a large scale.”

Carving out protected areas for grizzlies and other vulnerable species is crucial to maintaining a thriving eco-tourism business in the North, Timpany says. But he didn’t always feel this way. The Salmon Arm, B.C. native actually started out as a hunting guide for wealthy Europeans willing to pay big bucks to bag a grizzly. As a “bushrattin’” outdoorsman in his 20s, Timpany saw it as his ticket to working in the Northern wilderness. But after two years of tracking bears along the Taku, he grew disgusted by the practice. He remembers his breaking point vividly. He was coaching a visiting Belgian on how to shoot a bear. The Belgian merely struck the bear’s paw, sending Timpany in hot pursuit to finish the job. “The bullet entered the bear and exited in a large spray of blood and lung tissue,” Timpany recounts in *Bear: Spirit of the Wild*, a recently-released collection of photos and writings by Paul Nicklen, Werner Herzog and Wade Davis.

“It was a quick death. For me, this was anything but spectacular. The Belgian, however, was happy. He had paid \$8,000 to slay the bear.”

In 1975, while doing salmon research for the state of Alaska, Timpany stumbled upon the area where, shortly thereafter, he finally established the Nakina Adventures camp. Nothing more than a rough wall tent in the woods, it started as a fishing camp, growing in the mid-80s to include bear viewing once Timpany grasped the area’s potential as a haven for grizzly-minded eco-tourists. More recently, Timpany helped coordinate a consortium of environmental foundations to purchase the hunting and outfitting licence to a portion of the Taku River region. The \$1.7-million licence blocks any outfitting companies from hunting grizzlies there, a tactic meant to protect future bear populations.

“Rather than one person coming to the Taku region to kill a bear with a high-powered rifle, we have 45 or 50 people coming here a

year to look at bears,” he says. “When [the guests are] gone, the bears are all still alive. Some of these bears are in their 30s now.”

I MEET ONE OF NAKINA ADVENTURES’ youngest denizens – eight-year-old, 300-pound Katie – on my second day at the camp. The guests and staff have just finished a dinner of chicken mole and wine when Katie curiously approaches us on the patio. “Get up there on the edge of the deck and I’ll take a photo of you,” Timpany instructs me.

I slowly walk over to where he’s pointing and bend down. Katie sniffs the air and starts moving closer. Her brown eyes are focused on me; the trademark grizzly hump between her shoulders grows larger as she approaches. Timpany, who is also a filmmaker by trade, is rapidly snapping photos with his camera. And just as Katie starts closing the three-foot gap between the two of us, Timpany gets up from his crouched position and takes a step towards her. Intimidated, the bear turns away and wanders into the bush.

“One of the secrets of keeping it low-risk at a camp like this is being able to know which bear you’re dealing with and how to treat that bear,” he says. Katie is familiar to Timpany. “I knew her mother since she was a baby.”

Guests at Nakina Adventures aren’t required to sign a waiver or liability form. In the 30 years that Timpany has been offering grizzly bear viewing tours, he’s never had a serious incident between a bear and a human. The closest thing to it was when a fisherman was surprised by a bear. Rather than stand his ground, the angler backed up against a rock wall. The bear sniffed him up and down – and then walked away.

Though Timpany has never once fired his rifle at a grizzly while at one of his camps, that doesn’t stop him from taking every precaution. Guests aren’t allowed to wander trails on their own. Every cabin and viewing deck has an emergency air horn. Staff carry rifles with them when leading guests to one of two viewing decks along the river, or along a short hiking loop behind the camp. Timpany also enforces strict rules of conduct among his guests. He never allows people to touch the bears (or let the bears get close enough to sniff them, dog-like), because if people could, some of them would. (Says one recent guest: “When

you see those little cubs, you just want to pick them up, but you know it would be like grabbing a spinning lawnmower.”) One of the first things visitors are told is to look both ways before heading to the outhouse – you don’t want

to surprise a bear gorging on berries in bushes nearby, after all.

Amazingly, Timpany’s yearly insurance fees only amount to \$1,200, some of the lowest in the tourism industry. As far as he’s aware,



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there's never been a single fatality related to bear viewing in all of North America. And yet, our society demonizes grizzly bears, he says. "We're continually teaching our children this same philosophy that large carnivores, especially apex predators, are dangerous and it's a positive thing to not live around them and to even remove them."

Timpany actively encourages bears to visit his camp. He only runs his generator for a couple of hours each day. He avoids using power boats on the river. He discourages guests from walking on the riverbank (the area is reserved specifically for the bears, he says). He even refuses to cut down berry bushes that are encroaching on his walking trails. As a result, grizzlies walk straight through camp, rubbing against cabins and trees, and even brawling with one another in plain view of guests.

That creates some fairly comical situations, such as when Foamy, a 25-year-old sow, yanked a fresh line of laundry onto the ground and, along with her two cubs, rolled in the fresh towels and sheets to spread the soapy scent over their bodies. But having bears so close to camp has serious implications as well. Timpany has to be aware of everything going on in his camp, even in the middle of the night. He's late to bed and early to rise, always listening to everything going on outside.

Timpany himself has only ever had two close encounters with grizzlies in his life, neither of which were at his bear-viewing camps. In one of those situations, Timpany had an hour-long standoff with a predacious female grizzly that persistently charged him in Klunne Park. He wasn't armed that time, and had to rely on rocks and his own wits to survive. But Timpany doesn't like telling those stories.

He says they perpetuate negative stereotypes about grizzlies.

The staff at Timpany's camp – two cooks, a guide and a staff photographer – all admire the ease with which Timpany communicates with bears. "Phil knows how to react to bears in any situation and he tries to imitate them," says staff photographer Martin Rudlof. "He has this amazing way of observing the environment, of observing the bears. I think that makes all the difference."

ON MY FOURTH NIGHT, I'm awakened by the sound of something crashing far off in the bush. I fall back asleep almost immediately, but Timpany heads into the pitch-black night to confront Ace, a 900-pound, heavily-scarred male grizzly who's ripping apart Timpany's grey-water system. Timpany stands on the edge of the patio, throwing rocks at the main cabin, where the bear is tearing into the pit. Having forgotten his headlamp, Timpany doesn't realize he's standing directly in front of the bear. When he looks up, Ace is about a foot away from his face, staring directly into his eyes. Timpany deftly slips into the cabin and delivers a stern 'No' through the half-screened wooden door – after which the bear promptly takes off.

The next morning, as his staff work to repair the pit with some shovels, Timpany points out the sandy, football-sized paw prints on the patio to his three guests. "I'm not interested in volume tourism," he says later. "I do this to make a living but also because it's a really good model to show people that we can coexist with bears. Although the camp is an extreme example, I hope that I can make a difference in people's philosophies." **UB**

## WORKING WITH THE VUNTUT

Bear Cave Mountain materialized after Timpany was invited by Yukon government officials to set up shop in a newly-created ecological reserve in the territory's Fishing Branch Park. "I thought it was an interesting concept and a fabulous ecology as I had worked there for many years for the Department of Environment," he says. But he thought it would fail because access to the site requires a four-hour roundtrip helicopter ride from Dawson City. "I initially saw it becoming more of a labour of love than an economical business," he says.

But a meeting with the Vuntut Gwitchin Development Corporation convinced Timpany that the project would have financial backing. In 2005 Timpany partnered 50/50 with the first nations-owned company. They initially started with one guest and one guide in 2005,

monitoring the bears' tolerance levels each successive year. "In this business, it's all about offering the best possible product. Although the quality of service you provide is important, it becomes less relevant if you are displacing your product as a result of having too many guests. So you go slow." This year Timpany increased his occupancy to three groups of four people.

The Vuntut Gwitchin and the Yukon government collectively set the ground rules for the bear-viewing camp (the two created a parks management plan of the area in 2000 when the park was created). And Timpany has crafted his bear-viewing plan to work within the guidelines they have set out. The result is a successful partnership which ensures sustainable eco-tourism to the area. – Vivian Bellik

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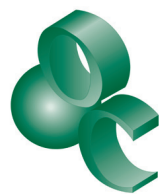
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