

Bear hugs with captive grizzlies

RESEARCHERS HOPE CAPTIVE GRIZZLIES CAN TEACH THEM HOW TO MANAGE WILD ONES

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Photos by DARIN WATKINS / Washington State University



Mica, a hand-raised, 2-year-old female grizzly, accepts pats from veterinarians Lynne Nelson and Charlie Robbins of the Bear Research, Education and Conservation Program at Washington State University. The program examines nutrition, hibernation and behavior, and its findings have helped guide management of bears in Alaska and around the world.

PULLMAN, Wash. -- Grizzly bears terrified me when I lived in Alaska. Hiking in places where humans are intruders, I bristled with the awareness that these huge creatures could eat me. Never mind that I ran in the Alaska Women's Run most summers. Grizzlies can run fast as a racehorse. I'd be lunch within 20 feet.

I knew my fear didn't match the facts. Grizzlies rarely attack people -- and on average, just two attacks are fatal each year in the U.S.

But when a grizzly hurts or kills someone, it's big news. And I worked in a newsroom where fellow reporters wrote about maulings. Sometimes I heard details too grim for print.

Once I saw fresh grizzly tracks in the mud near Seward. Placing my foot next to a paw print with claw marks, I was alarmed to see my size 6 boot was half its size. My hiking buddies and I sang Jimmy Buffett songs, hoping any bear within earshot would hear "Wastin' away in Margaritaville" and flee in panic.

It didn't help that I'd had my fill of snorting, charging moose on ski and hiking trails. Friends teased me about being a target for moose. Could I also be a target for bear?

Last October, two grizzlies bounded toward me, first at 30 feet, then 20, then five. I didn't move away quietly, talk in a low voice or wave my arms over my head -- any of things we're instructed to do in a bear encounter.

Instead, I took notes.

A writer charged by two grizzlies -- now that's a story. Stay calm, I told myself. Just write.

Fortunately, I wasn't in the wilds of Alaska but on a hill of clover at Washington State University's

Bear Research Center in Pullman. Using the biggest lab rats I've ever seen, scientists here study creatures too hot to handle in any other environment. They examine nutrition, hibernation and behavior, and some of their work is used to help guide management of bears in Alaska and throughout the world.



Writer Linda Weiford, right, plays with grizzly cub Kio at Washington State University, where bears are hand-raised for research purposes. WSU graduate students Karyn Rode -- left, playing with Peekka -- and Jennifer Fortin offer bear handling advice to Weiford.

MAKING FRIENDS

I'm standing in the research center's two-acre exercise yard as two young grizzlies named Peekka and Kio bound toward me. Their fur is the color of chocolate, shimmering with movement under a light rainfall.

WSU graduate students and grizzly researchers Jennifer Fortin and Karyn Rode instruct me not to reach out to the bears as they approach. No problem. I'm busy writing, staying calm.

Bam! Contact made. In a lightning-flicker movement, one of the bears grabs my notebook in its mouth and runs off. The second bear is right behind, chasing bliss. The two scamper and pounce like overgrown puppies.

"Off! Peekka, off!" Fortin shouts in a no-nonsense tone that presumably the cub understands because she drops my notebook from her jaws. My notes are smeared in bruin saliva.

At 9 months old, Peekka and Kio are considered toddlers. They are the size of sheep dogs, the density of tanks with arms and legs. Unlike most grizzlies at the facility, the two sisters were born in captivity, raised by humans using bottles and pacifiers. The idea is to train them to trust humans enough so they become agreeable research subjects.

Their rewards for good behavior? Honey water, apples and scones donated by Starbucks.

Zoology and wildlife biology professor Charlie Robbins founded the bear research center 20 years ago, taking in grizzlies that otherwise would have been killed and housing them in a former primate center.

"They were getting too close to humans, eating their garbage and sometimes their pets. They were on death row," said Robbins, a tall, lanky man who doesn't mince words when it comes to bears.

I ask him about the violent death of Timothy Treadwell, the controversial grizzly activist mauled by a member of the very species he adored.

"I was horrified by his cockiness. I found it amazing that anyone could be so egotistical to think he could blend in with grizzlies and treat them like friends," Robbins said.

Peeka and Kio act like my friends. They roll on the grass just below me, as if vying for my attention. Then they wrestle, whapping each other on the side of their head. Then off they go. They shimmy-shake and spin.

Just as I'm wondering how these oh-so-cute creatures can also be God-help-me killers, one leaps and knocks the notebook out of my hand. Fortin, the graduate student, suggests I put it out of their sight.

"They think it's a toy," she said. "We don't want to encourage them."

I tuck the notebook into my shirt and turn on my palm-size tape recorder. The interviews continue until Peeka knocks it out of my hand.

"Peeka, off!" Fortin scolds.

I pick up the recorder, turn it on and discover it no longer works. No notebook, no recorder. I do my best to memorize what I'm told, but some of the reporting for this piece must be done later, by phone interviews and e-mail.

Imagine this explanation to an editor: My story will take longer than anticipated because a grizzly bear ate my notes and broke my recorder.

Yeah, right.

Honest. I have witnesses.



ABC News correspondent Neal Karlinsky, left, and Nelson, center, bottle-feed Kio and Peeka, 3-month-old grizzly cubs, in April 2005. They and WSU graduate student Jennifer Fortin were being filmed for the TV show "Good Morning America."

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

It's exhilarating to watch Peeka and Kio play, creating green grooves as they drag themselves through the clover. They don't appear threatening now, but just wait. As they grow, they'll assert their dominance, Robbins explained. Researchers train the cubs not to bite or jump on people. (Apparently the no-jumping rule is a tough one for Peeka and Kio to follow, I think as I try to unjam my recorder's play button.)

"We say 'No bite' or 'Off!' and swat them on the face," Robbins said. "The idea is to instill very early in life that those behaviors won't be tolerated."

But as the bears get older, there are certain human behaviors they won't tolerate. Another grizzly, Luna, was 2 years old -- an adolescent in bear life -- when she nipped at Robbins one day. Following protocol, he swatted her on the nose and yelled, "No bite!"

Luna's response was unsettling. She stood up, looked him hard in the eye and uttered a low growl. Robbins backed away.

"She let me know the time for hitting was past. She communicated that there needed to be a certain level of respect between the two of us, just as a human adolescent would do to a parent. From then on, I didn't hit her. I only gave verbal commands."

The two graduate students escorting me at the facility have worked on field research projects that would give most people the jitters. They hung out at wilderness sites in Alaska, observing changes in grizzly behavior as humans fished or watched nearby. The women carried firearms just in case.

"My mom wasn't very happy about that part of my work. The idea of me being so close to wild bears made her pretty nervous," Rode said.

Rode's research was done in partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game at a time when bear viewing has become big business. Each summer, tourists swoop down on remote places such as the McNeil River refuge and Katmai National Park to watch grizzlies gorge on spawning salmon.

For researchers, the question was: How does this human activity within shouting distance of grizzlies affect their eating habits?

The study, soon to be published in science journals, concludes that too much human commotion causes bears to spend less time getting food and more time scanning their surroundings.

And since grizzlies need an enormous amount of food and nutrition to thrive, these findings are significant, Rode said.

The study's recommendations: Limit bear viewing to small groups; keep the groups in one location, such as a viewing platform; and have them come at the same time each day.

If human activity is predictable, it won't affect bears' eating patterns, Rode said.

"It's a win-win situation. Both groups are happy."

The research center also examined whether hunting affects bears that feed at adjacent viewing sites, a hot-button issue in Alaska between groups who want to watch the world-famous bears and those who want to hunt them.

"Nearby hunting makes some bears reluctant to come to bear-viewing areas. They become more wary of people," Robbins said.

The study is timely; Alaska's Board of Game will decide next year whether to allow hunters to shoot bears on state land adjacent to bear-viewing sites in the McNeil region.



Luna, a 2-year-old grizzly weighing 180 pounds, drinks a honey solution offered by Robbins, director of the program, while Nelson holds an ultrasound probe against the bear's chest. Nelson, a veterinary cardiologist, is researching hibernation. Her findings might lead to treatment of human heart disease.

HEARTS OF GOLD

At the WSU research center, a different kind of study is under way, and here is where the hand-rearing, rewards and affectionate pats pay off.

Veterinary cardiologist Lynne Nelson is researching their hibernating hearts, a great mystery of the animal empire. Her findings might lead to treatment of human heart disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S.

When a bear hibernates, its heart acts a lot like a diseased human heart. Its muscles weaken, and the blood thickens like sludge. Then, in spring, something magical happens. The bear's heart revs back up to normal.

"A bear's normal heart rate is 80 to 90 beats a minute. When they hibernate, it can drop to about 10 beats a minute," Nelson said. "Something makes the heart bounce back. We think it's attributed to several factors. Once we determine what those are, we hope to apply that knowledge to treating diseased human hearts."

At first, Nelson did ultrasounds on sedated bears, but she found the drugs affected their heart rates. Undrugged bears would offer the most pure data for the study, she determined.

Perform ultrasounds on the chests of *Ursus horribilis*?

"Hand-raising the cubs made them more cooperative," Nelson said.

GETTING REAL

Peeka and Kio have returned to their enclosure. I notice my pen is missing, so naturally I suspect one of them made off with it. But the two fur balls look so innocent -- until one yawns and displays a mouthful of dragon teeth.

After all, these aren't petite and docile white mice; they're North America's largest predator. And the facility has plenty of the large, fearsome variety.

Fear and excitement zing through me as I watch two big adult browns. Like people, they come in different sizes and moods. One is feisty, another crotchety.

Most are highly intelligent, resourceful and adaptable.

Stories from the center's researchers back that up. There's one about the grizzly that used her claw like a key to try to turn the locking mechanism on a container of food. There's another about the bear that didn't want to share, closing a gate to keep his den mate out so he'd have all the food for himself.

In the wild, they are fast, territorial and sometimes fearless. One swipe of the paw or snap of the jaw can steal a human life. Scary as that sounds, many grizzly attacks happen because of people problems, not bear problems, Robbins said.

Humans aren't careful enough with garbage. Sometimes they even play the dangerous game of trying to feed bears.

Also, tromping through bear country shouldn't be a Disneyland experience. Not paying attention, such as listening to music through headphones, can lead straight to trouble.

"It requires constant vigilance to be out there," Robbins said. "People should look for signs of bear activity and make enough noise to warn them that they're approaching."

I know this great Jimmy Buffett song that just might do the trick.