the Saga of #399

a Bear story

BY TODD WILKINSON

Grizzly 399 turns her cubs loose, while thousands of fans pray she can live another year

THOMAS D. MANGELSEN

For our species, it is one of the most sorrowful laments: the moment when parents bid their offspring adieu to find their own way in the big, cruel world.

This summer, a bear family in Jackson Hole is undergoing the ursine equivalent of that detachment. Tens of thousands of humans who caught enchanting glimpses of four grizzlies in Grand Teton National Park are anxiously awaiting reports of the outcome, hoping the course of apparent inevitability can be altered.

Perhaps with a Disneyesque nudge of her paw, or a gentle woof of maternal tough love, or, more likely, a simple sidelong glance of biological indifference, a grizzly sow will peel away from her brood of triplet cubs somewhere near the shores of Jackson Lake, turning them loose to fend for themselves.

But this is not the story of just any bear. Bear 399 and her tribe are part of the parable of modern wildlife conservation, testing human tolerance and the willingness of people to modify their behavior in order for grizzlies to persist in the American West without the armor of federal protection.

Hundreds of grizzlies are thought to be roaming the forests and mountains of northwest Wyoming, most of them rarely seen. Bear 399 and her three cubs are among the exceptions.

CAL McKITRICK

Today, there are said to be hundreds of grizzlies roaming the forests and mountains of northwest Wyoming. These seldom-seen bears live anonymously. Their very existence is debated, save for rare unexpected encounters with people in the woods. Then they vanish again.

"For a few years now, it has been difficult for me and my colleagues to convince park staff and local people in the community that grizzlies were here in such large numbers," says Grand Teton's senior wildlife biologist Steve Cain. "Nobody seems to doubt it any more."

Unlike wolf packs, which are bestowed with endearing monikers, bears, when captured by researchers and outfitted with tracking beacons, assume numeric references.

Bear 399 was born to a mother who had no history with the legendary Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Study Team that tracks bears across the landscape. 399 gained her identity in 2001 when, as a five-year-old sow, she was caught in a research trap and fitted with a special collar that emitted signals.

During the summer of 2004, 399 had a single cub at her side, but the youngster disappeared, possibly from starvation or a deadly encounter with an adult male bear. Whatever the cause of the loss, events since have shown that far from being a deficient parent, 399 is remarkably attentive, passing on the instincts of survival taught by her mother and necessary to survive in a crowded human world.

After shedding her collar in May 2005 and going off the air, 399 was captured and collared again. In late November of that year, she crawled into her den in the northern hinters of Jackson Hole for a long slumber. Around the third week of March the following spring, she emerged with three cubs the size of housecats at her side. The roadsides and natural areas encompassing Jackson Lake would be their high-profile home.

Almost immediately, the four-hundred-pound mother and cubs drew large crowds. They became a sensation, unlike any Jackson Hole grizzly in modern memory. "I don't like to anthropomorphize, but bears like her don't come around very often," says Franz Camenzind, executive director of the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance. A former wildlife documentary cinematographer for television, Camenzind says that the bears' popularity could actually prove to be their undoing, akin to celebrities hounded by paparazzi. "399 represents Jackson Hole's wildlife mascot. But I'll be honest with you—I don't know how the cubs will survive this year having been so habituated to people, because of the way their mother very skillfully made her living."

On April 30, 2007, an unprecedented milestone in American conservation history was reached, though it went largely unnoticed by the general public. Grizzly bears, the animal totem of the Yellowstone ecosystem and classified as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1975, were removed from the protected list. Their management was turned over to the states of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho.

The momentous move attracted a swift rebuke from environmentalists who filed suit in federal court to stop it retroactively.

Three decades ago when Yellowstone grizzlies received emergency protection, the population was in a free fall. Some predicted that the species here would vanish in this, the twenty-first century. Perhaps two hundred bears, and possibly far fewer, endured in the center of the ecosystem, primarily the backcountry of Yellowstone National Park, after years of

lethal run-ins with humans, habitat destruction, and killing of bears done to protect domestic livestock.

Following a thirty-year overhaul of the way public lands are managed, grizzlies have rebounded. The most optimistic of estimates say there may be three times more grizzlies than when the population was rushed into triage.

As Chuck Schwartz, leader of the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Study Team, likes to point out, the morning after delisting occurred, logging companies, oil and gas drillers, hard-rock miners, highway engineers, and real-estate developers did not launch an immediate incursion of bulldozers into prime grizzly habitat. "Little on the ground changed," he says. "It was kind of anticlimactic."

Because of a document called the "Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy"—agreed to by the states before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service relinquished authority—several thousand square miles of national park and forest are mandated to carry out management policies that make grizzly survival a priority. If they are not enforced, and bear numbers fall below a certain threshold, the population can be relisted. Part of the special bear conservation zone extends into Grand Teton National Park and both the Bridger-Teton and Caribou-Targhee national forests.

Despite claims by politicians that animals protected under the ESA served as roadblocks to economic development, delisting is more of a symbolic states' rights issue. Still, though Wyoming does plan to authorize a sport hunt of grizzlies, there are concerns about how much tolerance will be afforded wandering bears outside the conservation area.

"Recovery is a transition, not a precipice," says Dr. Christopher Servheen, the Fish and Wildlife Service's lead grizzly-bear expert, who has spearheaded bear conservation in the Lower 48.

"The fact that most people do not know that the bear is delisted, or notice it, is evidence of the success of the management system we built to assure the future of these bears," Servheen says. "We want the bears to continue to reoccupy places where they can live, like the Tetons. This expansion is likely to continue." Servheen and Schwartz are members of 399's fan club, but they remind us she is merely a piece of the overall bear puzzle.

"Bear jams" occurred frequently in Grand Teton National Park as grizzly 399 and her trio of cubs made their way around.

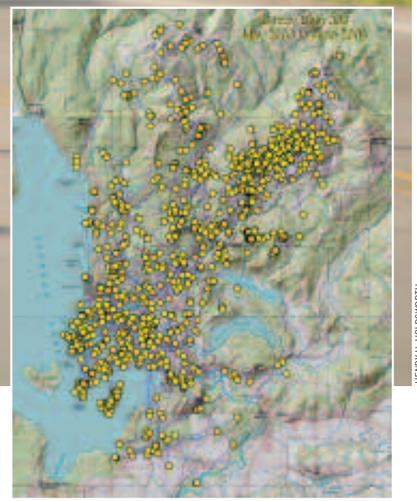
In the months following their second birthday inside a den, grizzly cubs are cut loose by mama. Young sows may hang around their mother for another year, sharing her home range and eventually becoming her replacement in the circle of life; boars, however, strike out to establish their own territory. With the best habitat niches taken by older, more aggressive grizzlies, young males generally wind up at the outskirts of established bear range or in areas that are not ideal, such as human developments. It can be a harsh, knock-around life.

"Data shows that if we can keep young sub-adult bears, especially males, out of trouble for a couple of years after they leave their mother's company, their chance of survival goes back up to the level of any wild bear in the population," Schwartz says. "But if they get into trouble, like, say, getting into garbage or a tourist throwing them food, the probability of their survival is reduced twenty percent each year."

Schwartz further notes: "A bear that wanders beyond the national parks has a 60 to 70 percent survival rate compared to an animal that stays inside Yellowstone all the time. Some of that has to do with an increased risk of coming into conflict with an armed hunter in the fall and dying as a consequence."

Adds Servheen: "Bears cannot live without people's help. This is especially important as bears live in risky places, as 399 does. Such bears require more care both from the public and from the Grand Teton National Park staff."

Speculation is that 399 may be frequenting roadsides and the fringes of developments because large aggressive male grizzlies prefer to avoid people and dominate the terrain where few humans are.



HENRY H. HOLDSWORTH

One year of Bear 399's movements around Grand Teton National Park and the adjacent Bridger-Teton National Forest, as recorded by a GPS radio collar logging her position every 140 minutes.

At Willow Flats, 399 dug for pocket gophers and excavated gopher stores of wild onion; she and her cubs also ate plants like dandelion and clover. It's the salad bar that precedes the arrival of early summer's main course—newly born elk calves. Once the feast of meat decreases from the banquet table, as surviving calves

become harder to catch, bears return to yampa and Indian potato. By late summer, with seeds in whitebark pine cones now ripe, they lumber into the higher country and along the way also snack on berries.

As grizzly bear numbers have grown, so, too, has the frequency of bears converging upon another food prior to denning—gut piles left behind by elk hunters after they've field dressed their animals in Grand Teton National Park or the Bridger-Teton National Forest.

When Cain arrived to work in Grand Teton as a biologist in 1989, sightings of grizzlies here were anomalies. Recently, he spoke with Mark Haroldson, who specializes in bear demography (bear numbers and dispersal) with the grizzly bear study team based in Bozeman, Montana. Their best professional estimate is that, astoundingly, sixty different grizzlies now use parts of Grand Teton during a typical year.

"When we do research trapping in the northern end of the park, we catch more grizzlies than black bears," he says. "Nothing like that would have happened twenty years ago. 399 makes visible to large numbers of people what is going on slightly behind the scenes in Grand Teton. Bears like her are going to be fixtures in Jackson Hole."

Trish and Mike Lavin live squarely in the middle of the new grizzly frontier. They're inhabitants of the Pacific Creek community, a national forest inholding of around twenty-five homes just northeast of Grand Teton's Colter Bay Village.

Both Wyoming natives (Trish is from Laramie and Mike from Casper), they have a strong family connection to ranchers. Mike, a stone and tile contractor, is an avid big game hunter. He once killed a giant Alaskan brown bear on Kodiak Island. Trish these days eagerly awaits visits from her grandkids, who enjoy playing in the yard. Judging by their cultural pedigree, one could assume the Lavins might harbor hostility toward grizzlies. In fact, they are bear supporters.

"Years ago, if I would've told my relatives who ranch that 'the government is saving grizzly bears and isn't that fabulous,' they would've thought I was crazy," Trish says. "We've been here sixteen years. We love the sense of wildness and all that comes with it."

The Lavins are keeping a watchful eye for 399's cubs. "We want those animals protected," Trish says. "There ought to be areas, like parks, where bears can live and not have to worry about someone getting rid of them. They should have a right of way."

399's brood has ambled through their neighborhood. Mike believes one of the greatest threats is carelessness on the part of seasonal residents of Pacific Creek who tote their lifestyles from suburbia with them. His bane: bird feeders.

If bears acquire a taste for seeds and the sugar water in hummingbird feeders, they are as hooked as a teenager on meth. Already, Wyoming Game and Fish has had to destroy aggressive black bears that developed a taste for bird food and human garbage. In 2007, five black bears that were radio collared in Grand Teton were put down in Jackson Hole.

COURTESY OF INTERAGENCY GRIZZLY BEAR STUDY TEAM

Craig Whitman of the USGS Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team attaches a GPS radio collar to an anesthetized Bear 399 in Grand Teton National Park, September 2005.

"The bear that got killed in Pacific Creek didn't do anything wrong. He came in, and you could watch him going from house to house where there were strings of birdfeeders hanging down from the eves," Mike says. "So far as I know, we haven't had any grizzlies getting into feeders yet, but if the food continues to be available, I think it's inevitable."

Grand Teton, home historically to a robust black bear population, has been grappling with the co-existence conundrum for decades at large campgrounds like Colter Bay. "Once you give black bears a food reward, they just keep coming back," says biologist Cain. "It's difficult to ensure 100 percent compliance with food storage regulations. Ninety-five percent of our emphasis isn't on bear management; it's on people management."

Schwartz draws a distinction between bears that are *habituated* to people and animals that are *food conditioned.* Habituated means bears feel comfortable with humans around and are neither threatened by their two-legged neighbors nor demonstrate aggressive behavior toward them. Food-conditioned bears are bruins that have somehow developed a taste for human edibles because of getting into open trash bins or receiving illegal handouts from tourists. Bear 399 is habituated, but has nourished her clan on natural staples.

"The issue you have when there are sub-adult bears recently weaned from their mother and habituated to people is that they could be more vulnerable to getting into human food," Schwartz says. "We all know that a fed bear is a dead bear. Knowing how the public loves 399 and her cubs, I would hate to be the person who, because of my own stupid actions, caused these animals to have to be destroyed."

The first year 399 was radio collared, researchers say she fed on a couple of dead cattle in a national forest grazing allotment that had perished after eating poisonous larkspur. "She stayed there and consumed them," Schwartz says.

Quietly during the past decade, Hank Fischer and Tom France of the National Wildlife Federation have been brokering a solution: Buying ranchers out of their grazing allotments in the park and national forest. The federation purchased the Blackrock/Spread Creek allotment from the Walton family, Bacon Creek/Fish Creek from the Stankos, and the Dunoir permit from Stephen Gordon. Today, the lack of beef cows means 399's cubs have a better chance of avoiding trouble.

"It's notable that these allotment closures have occurred without controversy," Fischer says. "I credit that to our acknowledgement that these grazing leases have economic value. By paying ranchers a fair value to give up problematic allotments, we have solved a problem for both parties."

Even with cattle and Winchester-toting cowboys gone from the scene, hazards endure.

In September 2006, Jackson-based wildlife photographer Thomas Mangelsen caught his first glimpse of 399 when she and her cubs were feasting on a moose carcass at Oxbow Bend. "I saw her briefly in the evening just after dark," he says. "It wasn't until spring the following year that I spent any significant time getting to know her."

Mangelsen drove up to Grand Teton every morning for several weeks straight in 2007. "She was all over the place," he says. One day 399 might be at Oxbow Bend, he says, or just down from Jackson Lake Dam along the river, or northeast toward Pacific Creek. Or she'd work her way past Jackson Lake Lodge to Christian Pond and over to Pilgrim Creek and Colter Bay.

"Except for the last few years, it's been rare in the Tetons to have grizzly bears so visually accessible," Mangelsen says.

Mangelsen, who owns the Images of Nature Galleries, is internationally renowned, especially for his pioneering pictures of large Alaskan brown bears fishing for spawning salmon.

"To have a beautiful sow and three cubs so visible doing the things that wild grizzlies are supposed to do, and with the Tetons rising above them as a backdrop, is as dramatic a setting as you're ever going to find," he says.

A professional colleague of Mangelsen's is wildlife photographer Diana Stratton, likewise a denizen of the Tetons who has spent perhaps more time

with 399 than anyone. "I retain snatches of impressions, mental pictures, concerns for her well being," Stratton says. There were days when Stratton escorted 399 before sunrise and after sunset, truck flashers on, so she wouldn't get hit in the dark. "At times she walked the center line, around blind curves, cubs playing in the road along the way," she says.

Mangelsen notes 399 had a galvanizing influence, winning the hearts of all who watched her. "She changed the negative attitude that some people have about grizzlies," he notes. "Along with her cubs, she made you want to protect her."

Jason Ryan has been working in Grand Teton since 1994 and today is the general manager of Signal Mountain Lodge. His operation has 165 summer employees accustomed to having black bears on the property daily. Grizzlies only seemed to appear, unpredictably, during the shoulder season. "I remember once sitting at the window in the early spring and watching a grizzly walk down to the lake. In twelve years, a view like that only happened three times," Ryan says.

Bear 399's troupe on the other side of Jackson Lake Dam started a buzz that carried into Yellowstone and spread among tourists; travelers from thousands of miles away would call and inquire "if that sow and cubs are still along the road ... we've heard too much about her … she's one of the reasons for our trip."

"I've become somewhat jaded about all the hysteria that surrounds wildlife sightings," Ryan says, "but I always pulled over on the road to see her. Her presence definitely enhanced the morale of our staff. It confirmed their decision to come out and work here for the summer.

"Guests were constantly coming into the lodge and saying, 'You wouldn't believe what we just saw!' You get the feeling it made their vacation and they'll never forget it. People don't expect to see grizzlies, and yet 399 was just down the street."

As the summer wore on, the stakeouts took on a circus atmosphere replete with people doing dumb things. Ryan shook his head at the number of motorists pouring out of their cars before rangers arrived on the scene and encircling the bear. "I found myself wanting to yell 'Don't do that! Please back off!' You would hear some of them say, 'I need to get close because I don't have a long lens on my camera.'"

THOMAS D. MANGELSEN

Bear 399 and her offspring are habituated to humans, but thus far not food conditioned. Fans of the bears and researchers alike hope the cubs can remain this way, which will greatly enhance their chances of co-existing with people.

Stratton and others discerned that in response to the commotion, 399 started modifying her routine to avoid the human mobs. She would drift into the dense river bottom around Willow Flats to hunt, rest, and nurse her cubs. The consensus from all quarters is that Grand Teton rangers did a fantastic job of transforming roadside bear jams into educational experiences for tourists.

Willow Flats has a poetic, peaceful ring to its name. As a point of geography, conservation biologists regard it as an ecological Eden. Hugging the eastern flank of Jackson Lake in damp bottomlands girding the Snake River, this plain of deciduous trees is not a grove, but a jungle with a canopy only ten feet high. It is an attractive place for pregnant cow elk to give birth, because it offers them the safety of visual concealment.

The same factors make Willow Flats a magnet for grizzlies, and thus it represents one of the most dramatic venues for predator-prey dynamics in North America. It's a phenomenon that surprisingly few humans see, considering that Willow Flats is situated between busy Jackson Lake Lodge to the north and Signal Mountain Lodge to the south.

On a Monday in June 2007, Dennis VanDenbos, a schoolteacher from Lander who is a popular science instructor at Wind River High School in Pavilion, checked in at Jackson Lake Lodge to attend an education conference. A native of Wisconsin, VanDenbos has been in the West for thirty years. He has incorporated discussions about public-land issues in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem into his classroom curriculum. Many of VanDenbos' students in Fremont County share the convictions of their parents, that grizzlies and wolves are plagues on the landscape.

VanDenbos, in his mid-fifties, tries to exercise every morning. On checking in at the lodge reception desk and seeing signs cautioning of grizzly presence and trail closures, he inquired where he might go. He was told to avoid going north because of bear activity. On the morning the conference ended, he decided that he would check out early, but first grab a brisk pre-

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breakfast hike. He entered the labyrinth of hiking, horse, and game paths webbing the area south of Jackson Lake Lodge and north of the Snake River just below the Jackson Lake Dam. Earlier in the week the area had been closed, but on this morning, shortly after dawn, no signs were posted. VanDenbos ended up on Wagon Road, which wends across a slight hill past a set of cabins and then drops down into the vicinity of Willow Flats.

After the fact, Jackie Skaggs, the spokeswoman for Grand Teton park, would remark: "It was a case of a person being at the wrong place at the wrong time."

During his stroll, VanDenbos saw a cow and calf moose trot by and halt to browse. Moving on, he observed a group of elk cows and calves off in the distance. Needing to make tracks, he picked up his pace. At the entrance to Willow Flats, he saw no horseshoe marks or human footprints and opted against continuing into the shadowy understory. Erring on the side of common sense, he turned around and retraced his route back toward Jackson Lake Lodge.

One of the first things he saw was a cow elk near the road behaving jittery, stotting through the sagebrush. "It seemed kind of strange she was so close to me," he recalls. What he didn't know was that 399 and her cubs had killed the cow's calf. Carcass and bruins, beyond his view, were just six feet away from where he was presently standing.

"I had no idea the bears were there, but I was kind of curious because of the way the cow elk was acting," he says. "I was looking around, maybe right at the sow, and I am sure she might have mistaken my body language as being menacing to either her cubs or the carcass."

VanDenbos continued to walk, oblivious that he had breached the comfort zone of the feeding bear family. He hadn't gone five paces before he heard a grunting, guttural growl and sensed a blur of brown closing on him.

He had no pepper spray.

As VanDenbos turned, 399 was in full charge. He still holds a picture in his mind: The angered mother is in focus, her neck fur is standing on end, and beside her are three fuzzy teddy bear shapes.

"I was thinking right away, 'This is bad. Oh shit, this is really bad.'"

VanDenbos yelled and slowly retreated, trying to backpedal toward the side of the road. He battled internally to keep his cool and yet embellish the size of his own presence to dissuade the bear's advance. "I am holding my arms out wide and yelling at the bear," he says. "I don't remember the details, but I was thinking it was like a large aggressive dog coming at you. I was shouting 'Hey, hey, hey!' to slow her down."

THOMAS D. MANGELSEN

For grizzlies, spring and early summer offer a salad bar of wild onion, dandelion, clover, and other plants. This precedes the arrival of summer's entree: newly born elk calves. Dessert in the fall consists largely of white-bark pine cones and berries.

Up the hill, other humans heard the noise of the fracas. They listened to VanDenbos shout at 399 and immediately phoned for help from rangers. "They knew something had happened, or was about to," VanDenbos says.

For a moment, the encounter was on the point of a pivot. 399 heeded VanDenbos' verbal rebuff and apparently decided not to make physical contact. "I didn't get a sense, based on her actions, that she wanted to hurt me, or eat me," he says.

399 veered slightly off course from VanDenbos and halted abruptly, but her momentum carried her past his position. As she tried to put on the brakes, 399 turned her head to look at him, perhaps attempting to read his intentions based upon his posture and the look in his eyes. "I've heard people say, 'Whatever you do, don't look directly at the bear. Don't make direct eye contact,'" VanDenbos says.

399 was little more than an arm's length away. VanDenbos remembers the surrealness of it all. He couldn't help himself; despite what he had heard, he was unable *not* to stare into the face of the animal. "I could see all those teeth and the side of her head in silhouette and the hair on her back. To be honest, it was really intriguing, a silver tip grizzly with hair rising straight off her shoulder. I said to myself, 'Why are you thinking about this now?' But I have to tell you, it was, in its own way, beautiful."

VanDenbos shambled backwards. He didn't realize it, but he was at a cornice where the road dips off into the ditch. He failed to find firm footing and stumbled. The movement, unfortunately, triggered a new reaction from 399 and her brood, tight on her heels.

Rising to his feet, VanDenbos, partially in the ditch, was at eye level with 399. "I dove straight down and pulled my arms over my head," VanDenbos says. "She came and bit me in the back as I played dead. I don't know why, but I had the sense it was just a warning."

The nip was followed by a more powerful clamp of teeth into his right backside. "It wasn't a tearing bite into my butt, but it was forceful and I knew she wasn't messing around," he says. "I was just thinking of how I should interpret this gesture, and how the encounter might possibly end."

He could feel a bear paw standing on his left calf, when he was stung by another bite into his left butt cheek. "This wasn't like the earlier bite," he said. "This was bite and tear. And I thought, 'Well, they are going to eat me now.'"

VanDenbos—husband, schoolteacher, human—was in the same predicament the now-dead elk calf had been in minutes earlier. Did 399 recognize the difference between species?

"It was just like a documentary you see on TV, when a big predator takes something down," VanDenbos says. "I was a participant and it wasn't pleasant, but I really wasn't feeling pain as such."

He anticipated an immediate onslaught. He had stopped screaming. He just lay there, knowing there was nothing he could do. Out of the corner of an eye, he saw 399 standing over him, joined by the three other shapes. The heads of the cubs poked around from behind the back of their mother, awaiting her maternal cue. Given the succession of events that started with their successful hunt of the calf, VanDenbos figured it would have seemed logical for the cubs to regard him as another teaching moment from 399.

In fact, he was right.

He waited for the next bite. Then he heard a loud human voice. The weight of the paw that had been resting on his body suddenly was gone. There was what seemed like a long void of activity. He didn't budge. As it turns out, a woman cook, who makes breakfast for the tourist trail rides, and a wrangler companion, had come motoring up the road. The cook later told VanDenbos it was the first morning of the still-young visitor season that she had shown up precisely on time for work.

The pair in the vehicle had seen a huddle of bears. They'd stopped and reached for their cameras, excited to spot a bunch of grizzlies together and feeding on an animal. Once they discovered it was a human that was down, they screamed in horror.

The bears got up and ambled slowly away. VanDenbos, dazed and in shock, limped toward the truck.

"I told them I just got attacked by some bears and I needed help," he says.

399 and the triplets had regrouped

and were sitting in the road, with the cubs gathered behind their mother. "We backed up in the truck and as soon as we were pulling away, they ran toward the calf and dragged it across the road away from the cabins," VanDenbos says.

A tenant in one of the cabins heard the bears chewing and eating. Unaware of the calf, she assumed it was VanDenbos they were gnawing on.

In the confusion that ensued, with VanDenbos being rushed to medical attention, rangers racing to the scene, a witness under the false impression that he was dead, and the bears devouring fresh meat, it would not have been extraordinary to have law enforcement personnel shoot and kill one or all of the bruins. Fortunately, word quickly passed via radio that VanDenbos was alive, that he had inadvertently stumbled upon the bears, and that he wanted no harm to come to them. By buying time, the facts gave park officials room to make sound decisions that resulted in 399 being left to roam.

Schwartz of the grizzly bear study team says second-guessing 399 is pure conjecture. "No one interviewed her afterward to get her take on what went down, but if she had wanted to treat him as prey and make it a lesson in hunting for her cubs, she would have," he explains. "I think she probably *was* teaching her offspring. She showed them how a bear can respond non-lethally to people when humans represent a threat to them and their food source. Except for what the gentleman went through, I think this is a positive outcome, not a negative one."

While some residents of Fremont County have held up the mauling as evidence that grizzlies are dangerous, VanDenbos, the victim, calls himself a bear advocate. He does support a carefully managed sport hunt of grizzlies outside the national parks as a way of making bears warier around people, especially near human developments. But he also understands that he was trespassing through 399's terrain, and he respects her need for space. "She has found a niche where she has the natural food resources to support her family and be away from male bears that could bring her cubs harm," he says. "You can't fault her for being a good parent."

Cain and crew implemented an immediate closure at Willow Flats. And, paralleling the adoption of Bear Management Areas in Yellowstone, which include some parts of the backcountry being permanently closed to tourists, Grand Teton in 2008 is implementing a seasonal closure at Willow Flats.

"When we have a summer like we had in 2007, it exposes a weakness in our armor, in terms of how we manage bears and how we manage people living in close space," Cain says.

If only it were so simple.

Park officials generally have broad flexibility with day-to-day management concerns. What they have no latitude to change is the fact that Grand Teton is the only national park in the Lower 48 with a big-game hunting season. Grandfathered in as a part of a deal struck in Congress in 1950 when the park boundaries were expanded, the autumn elk hunt in both the park and adjacent Bridger-Teton National Forest is a sacred ritual for some and a repulsion to others.

"I know the hunt was grandfathered," says Mangelsen, "but I think the elk hunt in Grand Teton National Park is unfortunate, to say the least. It may have been okay in the early 1950s, but it's no longer appropriate. The park has changed, society has changed, values have changed, and grizzlies, one of the rarest creatures in the Lower 48, have a much-deserved home in Grand Teton, when almost sixty years ago, they didn't."


ROBERT SMITH

Bear 399 was first caught in a research trap in 2001 as a five-year-old sow, when she was fitted with a radio collar. After shedding that collar, she was captured and collared again.

Only Congress and the signature of a president could eliminate the hunt. The political reality of it being rescinded is basically nil.

Forest Stearns, owner of A+ Outfitters, has a different perspective than Mangelsen. He's a sportsman who makes his living giving clients the elk hunt of their lives. "When I first started guiding hunting trips in the mid-1970s, there were a few grizzlies around Jackson Hole, but they were the exception rather than the rule," Stearns says. "Now we have them coming out of our ears everywhere. The recovery deal has worked very well."

Stearns says his clients have deep-rooted feelings about bears. "I would say that, overall, the presence of grizzlies enhances the quality of the experience for most of them," he says. "Most of these guys are fairly extreme-type hunters. … They've been around the world and the places that feel wild and unpredictable are where they want to go."

Stearns requires that every hunting party undergo an orientation on how to use cans of pepper spray and how to be more aware in grizzly country. He also discusses the regulations pertain-

ing to quickly field dressing a harvested animal, moving it away from the gut pile, packing out the meat, and realizing that some bears have learned to associate rifle shots with the possibility of a free dinner.

"We are doing some things now that we didn't used to," Stearns says. "If we have to leave meat overnight because an elk was harvested late in the day, we separate the animal from the gut pile. In the 1970s, we would have left it and come back the next morning with pack horses. Ninety percent of the time if you leave an animal on the ground, bears will be on it. Co-existence between people and bears is a work in progress. We, in this day and age, have to be a lot more on our toes."

Here's the double-edged sword: The very same gut piles that attract grizzlies onto the paths of hunters are an important source of nutrition that aids bears, especially pregnant females, as they head into the den. Bears that feast on them have more weight and stay healthier during the months of dormancy. Elk store a lot of fat in their omentum—the spaces between their digestive tract. That sustenance is calorie dense. Healthy fatter females are more likely to carry their cubs to term, and research suggests they yield larger litters.

399 was a gut pile beneficiary.

Schwartz says that usually there are *not* large numbers of lethal incidents between bears and hunters. But he notes that in 2001, sixteen grizzlies were killed by hunters alone around the ecosystem, some occurring from incidental run-ins but many from bears and humans meeting near a harvested animal. Typically, spikes in bear deaths also coincide with years when there is low production of seeds in whitebark pine cones.

DIANA STRATTON

Hunters in Grand Teton park are warned of bear activity.

Proficient with long camera lenses and spotting scopes, Mangelsen became horrified last fall when he was following the movement of 399 just after sunrise, as she was moving between the banks of the Snake River and sagebrush uplands. Amid the panorama, he counted eighteen different hunters and not one was aware of 399 skirting the space between them. "Fortunately, by sheer luck, there wasn't a face-to-face encounter," Mangelsen says. Pausing, he grimaces and adds: "It could have been tragic. We hoped the Park Service would close that area because the potential of somebody getting hurt or one of the bears getting shot and killed seemed pretty high to me. The hunt starts before sunrise."

Mangelsen recalls waterfowl hunting back in his home state of Nebraska. "When it was a half hour before sunrise, you couldn't tell the species of a duck," he says. "And here elk hunters are supposed to be able to recognize a spike bull from a cow?"

Mangelsen claims to have witnessed many infractions over the years, in which hunters have opened fire on elk and inad-

vertently killed a bull when they intended to shoot a cow, or vice versa. Statistics from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department confirm that this does occur. Occasionally, animals are left to rot. Last fall, Mangelsen says, he spoke to a hunter who told him a colleague had downed a spike bull and abandoned it in a place where hunters were active. Within hours, 399 and her cubs were feeding on it.

DIANA STRATTON

After a long winter, Bear 399 and her cubs emerged in April 2008 from their final hibernation together. They will part and go their separate ways this summer.

"If the hunt took place in the summertime in front of thousands of tourists, it would be immediately shut down because people would be upset," Mangelsen says. "It's the only national park, to my knowledge, with a hunt of a big game animal. But if you ask most Americans, they think national parks are supposed to be sanctuaries for wildlife, not places where you fill your elk tag.

"The gift we have with 399 is an amazingly fragile thing," he adds, obviously emotional at the thought. "She's not a million dollar bear. She is priceless. If she and her cubs can't be safe in a national park, then where will they be? In a zoo?"

At the height of the elk hunt last fall, dozens of wapiti had been killed and dozens of sportsmen were still in the woods. Bear 399 was roaming among gut piles, manic with the effects of hyperphasia, a condition affecting bruins as they load up on as much food as possible before denning.

Many, including Mangelsen, feared that the mama and her cubs were on a collision course with doom. What Mangelsen didn't know was that park rangers and wildlife officials were on their radios trying to encourage chatter among hunters about 399's movements. Hunting guides and hunters were contacted and asked to be on the lookout for her. But there was only one problem: 399 is among at least a half dozen sows with cubs in the area, many of them not radio-collared—which meant researchers didn't know where they were, either.

Despite being lobbied hard by citizens to implement closures to hunting in Grand Teton, park superintendent Mary Gibson Scott consulted with Cain and opted against it. One reason was that 399 was constantly on the move, meaning closure zones would need to be constantly shifted. As Scott pointed out in an open letter to the public, implementing a closure on behalf of 399 would create a false sense of security when, in fact, hunters needed to be aware of other bears out there. Fortunately, 399 made it to her den in December.

What will happen to 399 and the cubs? "When those cubs venture out this year, they will be continually testing the measures that humans have in place," Stratton says. "They will be probing for easy ways to feed themselves. The park and Game and Fish need to be ready."

Female grizzlies of reproductive age are the gold standard of the Yellowstone bear population. The survival of only a few, even in an area with reportedly hundreds of bruins, means the difference between a rising or falling population. These bears will have thousands of guardian angels walking on two legs.

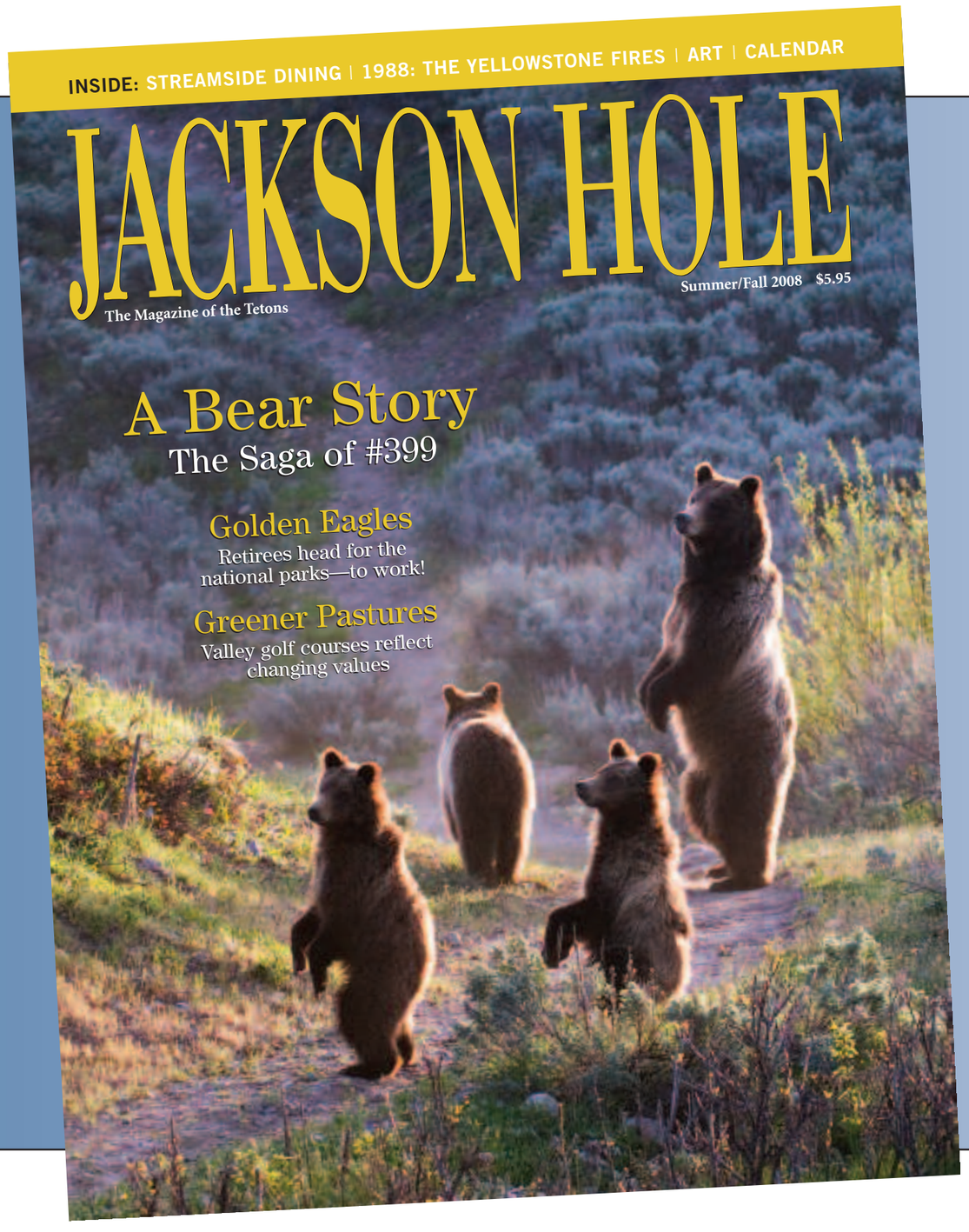
Socially, residents of Jackson Hole have incorporated an expanded grizzly presence into their daily lives. Backpackers instinctively take along pepper spray, the park this year is applying strict food-storage regulations for overnight campers, and hunters must carry pepper spray and undergo an orientation on the necessity of quick field dressing.

Cain's prediction for the future: "We will see a larger number of bears in the Teton Range itself, and grizzlies moving into the southern part of the park where we have high visitation. I expect the experience will be similar to Glacier National Park, where there are a lot of bears, but [they are] habituated to the presence of people and not a problem."

As for 399, letting the triplets go is not an end but a beginning. Most likely, with sound nutrition, she will be healthy again and in estrous in 2008, attracting another bruin suitor who will leave her to fend for a new generation of cubs.

In the meantime, Mangelsen, Stratton, and a legion of locals will be out this autumn on the wide sweep of sagebrush, willow, and wood, keeping a watchful eye as the elk migration flows southward to the National Elk Refuge, bringing 399 to again navigate the firing line.

"We need to cross our fingers, not point our fingers or our gun barrels at others," says Camenzind. "We're in this together with the bears. This is a harbinger for how two species, historically at odds with one another, are trying to be compatibly sympatric in a landscape where they didn't evolve together. It's an interface that is going to happen more and more, only if we allow it to." ■



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