

# Guard of the Grizzlies

KATHERINE KENDALL BRAVES THE WILD FOR BEARS

By Kathryn Sonant

## Current Position

Research Ecologist at the USGS's Northern Rocky Mountain Science Center

## Favorite Aspect of Job

Sharing my research findings with other scientists, managers, and the public because there is so much interest in bear biology and behavior

## Favorite Book

*Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond

## If I Were in Charge of the World

We would have world peace, sustainable environmental practices, and less emphasis on consumerism

**Quote to Live By** "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you ... while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." —*John Muir*

Katherine Kendall visits the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Alaska.



Credit: Courtesy of Katherine Kendall

Very few jobs require face-offs with 800-pound creatures that can stand 7 feet tall. But Katherine Kendall has eagerly taken on the challenge during her 34-year career of studying and conserving grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*). Typically when she encounters bears, they run quickly away. "But once," she says, "I was charged by a female grizzly with a yearling that I surprised at close range. She came within 10 feet before stopping and running back to her cub. I briefly considered taking up mouse research after that."

A research ecologist for the U.S. Geological Survey's Northern Rocky Mountain Science Center in Glacier National Park, Montana, Kendall recently spearheaded the world's largest non-invasive study of bears to date. Grizzlies in the continental United States have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1975, though Yellowstone National Park's population was delisted in 2007. Despite their protected status,

it wasn't until Kendall led the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project in 2004 that ecosystem-level data were available to evaluate the effectiveness of grizzly bear conservation efforts.

The goal of the project was to estimate just how many bears live in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem in northwest Montana, which researchers believe has the best conditions for the species' long-term survival out of the six grizzly bear recovery zones established by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Few people get the opportunity to look at a population at an ecosystem scale. It's been a phenomenal opportunity," Kendall says.

The project used innovative, non-invasive hair snagging techniques to collect DNA in order to obtain a population estimate and information on distribution, mortality rate, and genetic structure. Kendall oversaw 210 employees as well as hundreds of volunteers who spent several months

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trekking through 7.8 million acres of rugged mountains and roadless wilderness collecting grizzly hair. “Our population estimate for the ecosystem—765 grizzlies—was two and a half times larger than the working estimate, which means the human-related mortality rate was overestimated,” says Kendall. “We were able to get a very precise estimate, which is important for establishing a baseline for monitoring population trends.”

### Forging Her Own Path

Kendall's pioneering spirit and courage have been apparent throughout her career. In 1970 she joined the first class of women admitted to the University of Virginia, one of 450 female undergraduates out of 10,000. “I never consciously tried to break down barriers for women, I just followed my interests,” she says. Kendall had a similar experience when she went back to school for her master's degree in fish and wildlife management. “When I got to Montana State University in 1977 there were only a few women in the wildlife department and we didn't always receive a warm welcome. On the job, I encountered lots of people who were sure that I wasn't tough enough to handle field work, especially trapping grizzly bears.”

Kendall's passion for bears was sparked in 1974 during her first job in the wildlife profession, when she worked for Ted Sudia, chief scientist for the National Park Service, in Washington, D.C. After two women were killed by bears in Glacier National Park in 1967, there was a heated controversy over how to close dumps in Yellowstone National Park in order to deter bears from human-inhabited areas. The debate led Sudia to establish the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study as well as chair the first Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, a group of experts who coordinated federal and state activities affecting bear conservation. “I got fascinated with grizzly bears through my involvement with the committee while working for Ted,” Kendall says. “When I decided to go to grad school, there was no question in my mind that I'd love to study an aspect of grizzly bear ecology in Yellowstone. It was my good fortune to be able to do just that.”

She's been studying bears ever since. She left Washington, D.C., in 1977 to get her master's degree at Montana State University and work at Yellowstone National Park as a research biologist



Credit: Derek Reich, Zooprax Productions

Kendall constructs a barbed-wire hair trap to obtain grizzly bear hair for DNA testing. See [video](#) of Kendall's traps in Montana's Glacier National Park on her USGS web page.

for the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team. She remained at Yellowstone until 1982, then went to Glacier National Park, where she has studied bear habitat and conducted demographic research for the past 26 years. As is usually the case, though, she spends less time in the field and more time in the office now that her career has advanced to include research program management. “Field work was what I loved, what I wanted to be doing,” she says. “But when I'm honest with myself, I think if I was still doing the kind of field work I was doing 20 years ago, carrying a heavy pack up and down mountains every day, I'd probably have to get both of my knees replaced.”

At the tail end of the Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project, Kendall is anything but bored. She's already secured funding to analyze black bear hair samples collected in Glacier National Park during the grizzly project. “It's been a wild few years,” she says. “For a field biologist to end up in charge of a giant army of people spread out over this great expanse of wilderness and have everything work out so well has been very gratifying.” ■

*Kathryn Sonant is a contributing editor to The Wildlife Professional.*

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