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Sharing My Days with Large Predators

The wildflowers stretch in every direction as far as I can see. Paintbrush, aster, fireweed, rock jasmine, locoweed, veronica speedwell, globeflower, hepatica, yarrow, brown-eyed Susan. They start at the edge of the narrow trail I'm hiking through Sunshine Meadows and fill every nook and cranny of the surrounding hillsides, wild colors bobbing in the wind. Interspersed with the flowers are established colonies of larches and aspens. Chickadees flit from branch to branch, while the ravens float higher up. By the edge of an icy-cold stream I see a clump of moss campion, my favorite. I'm carrying water, lunch, bear spray, and rain gear. At the lodge I learned that a grizzly has been sighted several days in a row on and around the trail. I find old tracks of the long, five-fingered paws, alongside coyote scat.

These hiking days in Alberta's Rocky Mountains feed me in a way nothing else does. I'm surrounded by and immersed in beauty. I'm enveloped by a healthy ecosystem, something we can no longer take for granted. I'm in the midst of friends—the wildflowers and animals that make up this ecosystem. I'm sharing the space with the large predators I love.

The bounty of gifts that comes from spending time outside

I lived for seven years in Canmore, Alberta, on the edge of Banff National Park, in the heart of Canada's Rocky Mountains. Canmore sits inside the Bow Valley, a long, narrow valley running through the southwest quadrant of the Rockies. This small town is entirely ringed by mountains. I had never lived in or near mountains before, and I immediately fell in love with the rugged, majestic landscape. Hiking became a favorite activity, and over time I climbed steeper paths than I could have imagined. This activity corroborated, again, what so many of us believe to be true—re/connecting with our surrounding ecosystems yields positive results. I could start by trying to explain what it meant to be immersed in the beauty and wonder of the mountains, the spiritual sense and the mystery so vividly present, the gift of living in a relatively healthy natural ecosystem. And an unexpected positive result came from living with large predators.

Before I lived in the Bow Valley, in spite of all the time I spent outdoors, I rarely encountered predators who could harm me. Thinking back, I can only recall three experiences with predators. In the Boundary Waters, I had heard wolves howling while lying in my tent in the early evening—a phenomenal experience that made me

weep, but not one that put me in any imminent danger. When hiking through rattlesnake habitat in a jaguar preserve in Belize, there was imminent danger of a bite from a startled snake, and I can assure you that my ability to focus on the ground in front of me was quite impressive. During the year I lived in Florida and took weekly trips to the Everglades, I was cautious about the presence of alligators and crocodiles. But these experiences did not work their way into my consciousness, did not remind me on a daily basis about my vulnerability as it relates to animals. Moving to Canmore did. In the Bow Valley, there is a small but significant population of bears, wolves, and cougars. I will also mention moose and elk here, not because they are predators but because they are large animals who can hurt and kill humans quite easily.

It's a simple matter these days to gain accurate knowledge about hiking through and living in grizzly territory. Starting as soon as I moved to the Bow Valley, I attended information sessions, talked to wardens and hikers, read, watched films, and learned about sharing territory with predators. Understanding helpful basics is a key first step, and the most basic is this: the vast majority of bears are uninterested in us as prey, although there is an occasional bear who is, quite simply, focused on predation. Most bear-human encounters occur because the human does the wrong thing in grizzly territory, and in doing the wrong thing, puts themselves and the bear at risk. I heard the phrase "Bears want to avoid us" over and over again. These predators are not lying in wait and then stalking us in hopes of a good meal. They want to stay away from us, and they want us to stay away from them. The most common reasons for the rare attacks are surprising an animal, inadvertently coming between a predator and their offspring, or unknowingly disturbing a predator about to make a kill.

Dense clueless human in area—bears beware

Doing the wrong thing during such a meeting can have serious consequences, for the human and the bear. People have been seriously injured and killed, and afterward, the animal, even if acting strictly defensively, has typically been killed by park wardens. In most cases, the entire situation could have been avoided had the person acted correctly. For example, in the case of bear safety, the simplest and safest thing to do while hiking in these mountains is to regularly make a loud noise, including calling out in a loud voice and clapping hands. This simple act announces to bears: "Large biped arriving—stay away!" Carrying and knowing how to use bear spray (a concentrated pepper spray, which, if sprayed in the face of an attacking bear, will typically cause the bear to run off) is another important action. I would not have figured this out from simply watching hikers on the trail, because on every hike I take, I encounter quiet hikers who do not appear to be carrying bear spray. If they are indeed hiking with-

out bear spray, these people are putting themselves, and the bears, at great risk. It's important for everyone's safety to use noise as the first defense, bear spray and the incredibly loud "bear bangers" as the second. Bear bangers are a deterrent that make a loud, explosive noise, and in the event of a bear charging you, the release of one of the bangers from its holder will hopefully scare the bear away without harming it. Bear spray is a concentrated pepper spray that shocks and temporarily injures animals; bears tend to run away from it. Interestingly enough, research shows bear spray is more effective in protecting us against aggressive bears than guns are. And while these defenses are usually reliable in averting attacks, there are instances when the unpredictable happens; in spite of following these guidelines, hikers can find themselves in the midst of a terrifying situation with a bear charging with intent to harm. This is also part of the reality we cannot ignore—we cannot become overly reliant on noise and bear spray to the point of complacency.

While learning how to protect myself from bears, I learned something that at first glance may seem contradictory: the bear population is precarious and vulnerable. Now vulnerability may not be the first adjective that comes to mind when considering a creature who could fell you with one swipe of their paw. But it is an apt descriptor. Living in Canmore, I heard almost weekly about the damage brought to bear communities by human-induced activity. I saw who received the bullet to the head after a human did something they had been told repeatedly not to do—and it was not the human. Through listening to and reading the updates from park wardens and researchers, and watching footage from infrared cameras, I developed strong personal connections to the bears who are monitored in the Bow Valley. Repeatedly I learned of bears' deaths, and each loss would bring home their terrible precariousness.

Human activities on a global scale have already weakened and in some cases destroyed bear populations. Today there is still tremendous pressure on bear populations, including bears in the Bow Valley. This pressure comes in the form of developers who want to build housing in bear habitat and on the pieces of land set aside for wildlife (known as wildlife corridors), governments that have often sided with the developers in spite of their own laws prohibiting such development, and the grizzly bear hunt. Then there are the many humans who refuse to abide by the 90 kph speed limit through Banff National Park and whose unsafe speeds lead to bear deaths on the road. Here in Alberta, it is only the sustained efforts of environmentalists over the decades that have helped to stabilize the grizzly population. This work has involved a wide range of activities: attempting to prevent development in inappropriate places, banning the grizzly hunt, being creative and deliberate with retraining (rather than killing) bears who have become habituated to humans, and attempting to pass regulations forcing the rail companies to keep the tracks free of grain. This work has been painfully slow, in part because of the

typical resistance to environmental change, and in part because activists have to confront the many prevailing stereotypes about large predators.

Learning about bears went well beyond being prepared to use bear spray

Armed with accurate information and bear spray, I hiked my noisy way through the Rockies until these actions simply became part of my regular routine. And then my consciousness shifted. In integrating the knowledge that I lived with large predators and internalizing their presence, I felt like a part of a shared ecosystem in a deeper way than I had ever felt. Before this, I knew about the many dangers presented by people, cars, machines, and weapons, but an attack by a large predator was not on the list. Now it was. And adding bears to the list literally altered the scale of humans in the landscape. We were now on a more appropriate scale; hiking through the mountains, I began feeling like a small player in a large, complex field of species. I welcome this internal sense of smallness and rightness. I've never wanted to be "top dog" on the planet, never wanted my species to claim that title. Here in the Bow Valley, we aren't. We live with predators who are strong, resourceful, and able to cause significant damage to human bodies. This provides us a more realistic dimension or place in the ecosystem as a whole; in my case, it viscerally reminds me that I'm sharing the landscape with others, that we are one species among many. It makes me pay attention in a different way.

This perspective was not entirely new. Over the decades, I had felt similar shifts. Certainly walking through the old growth forest of the Pacific Northwest had provided an explicit lesson in scale. The rugged canyons of the American Southwest were another place where I can remember that beautiful feeling of smallness and rightness. Even in my years of wandering delightedly through the narrow trails in Wisconsin's tallgrass prairies—with six- to eight-foot grasses waving over my head—reminded me of my small stature. The ways I've developed kinship with other species over the decades have impacted my perspective on humanity's real size. And my connection with large predators in Alberta's Rocky Mountains has deepened this set of perspectives and strengthened these kinship links.

A reminder about vulnerability

My most recent bear interaction happened while hiking the Yamnuska Trail, on the outskirts of Canmore. It was my first hike with my new rescue dog. Robby had to adjust to the short leash that linked

around my waist and kept him securely at my side, and to the strange apparatus in my hands (hiking poles). We successfully reached the shoulder of the mountain, where we sat for lunch, and where he more than willingly shared a rather dry peanut butter sandwich and an apple. Robby wasn't too happy with the speed at which we descended the trail, which is always the trickiest for my shaky knees; we had to tackle the steep downhill stretches deliberately and slowly. I called out to any bears who might be in the vicinity, and talked aloud to Robby about the flowers we were seeing. In the midst of one such discussion, he suddenly stopped and looked to the right with full attention, ears up, eyes wide. His behavior was clearly not in response to my discussion about the beauty of the prairie smoke flower. I looked where he looked. A mere ten meters away stood a young grizzly, perhaps 2 years old, stretched up on back legs while energetically scratching tree bark. As I said earlier, while making noise is the best bet for encouraging grizzlies to avoid humans, it is not a guarantee, and young bears in particular can act unpredictably. Certainly that was the case here. We looked each other in the eye for some eternity, likely 20 seconds at most. Several scenarios raced through my mind. The bear could react fearfully, which could mean any number of possible actions. The bear could react aggressively and charge us. Robby could react fearfully and bolt down the path, with the intent of saving his own ass—and with the steep pitch of the trail and the principle of momentum, I would be dragged after him, face first. Robby could bark or move aggressively and thus precipitate a similar response on the bear's part. Leaning on my poles, aware of the pitch of the steep slope, staring wide-eyed at the bear, considering all of these possibilities, I felt very precarious. Thankfully, Robby remained frozen by my side. The bear remained standing at the tree. Given that the bear had already heard my voice, I chose to continue speaking aloud; I blessed the bear, praying for her safety, survival, long-term health, and descendants who would carry the species a long way into the future. I then moved slowly down the path, clutching Robby as closely as I could, looking over my shoulder at the bear so we could continue maintaining eye contact.

Mutually vulnerable, we touched each other's lives in our shared habitat. *m*

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