

The Spirit of the Pacific Northwest

# Northwest

**Grizzlies**  
of the Great Bear Rainforest

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**Grizzlies  
of the Great Bear Rainforest**

by Nancy J. Wagner





▲ A grizzly bear fishing for spawning salmon in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest.

**T**he thought of seeing the grizzly bears that call British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest home was the draw for me. Add in lush forests filled with some of the world's largest trees, crystal clear streams packed with spawning salmon, and craggy snow-capped peaks, and I figured I had the perfect remote setting to enjoy while I was at it.

Not long after I reached the rainforest and stood on a cliff above a stream, the stench of rotting salmon carcasses overwhelmed me. It was obvious why grizzlies were drawn to the area. It didn't take long before I heard splashing from farther down stream. There were so many

logs in the way I couldn't spot the bear at first then I set my eyes on a rich chestnut-colored grizzly jumping and splashing along the water's banks.

**"More than 140 bird and animal species call the Great Bear Rainforest home, including three species of bears ..."**

I watched the bear fish along the stream. It would pick up an old bloated salmon carcass floating on top of the water, take a whiff, then drop the fish back into

the water. When it saw a fish swimming, it jumped into the air and splashed down on top of the fish. This method looked more fun than useful, but the bear's thick, luxurious coat and rounded belly told me it had caught plenty of fish all fall.

When the bear reached a deeper part of the stream it started snorkeling for salmon, putting its entire head underwater. I could see its strong back legs kick as it propelled itself through the water. While I could see salmon everywhere, this bear didn't seem to find what it was looking for. I watched the bear drag a huge dead fish up from the bottom of the stream after being underwater for some time, but it discarded that one, too.





Lush forests, snow-capped mountains, clean rivers and streams, and abundant food sources make the Great Bear Rainforest the perfect habitat for a wide variety of wildlife.



Finally, the grizzly got out of the water at a gravel bar farther downstream, shook itself off, and began sniffing along the banks again. The bear eventually walked around a bend in the stream, and I could no longer follow its progress.

As I stood there in awe at seeing my first rainforest grizzly, it dawned on me why people feel so strongly that this expanse of rainforest needs more protection than it's currently getting. It's a beautiful, rugged, and magical place, but even more importantly, it's home to a variety of threatened and endangered wildlife and bird species. And those species, including some of Canada's largest grizzly bears, rely on the rainforest to keep the salmon running thick for their survival.

### A land filled with natural treasures

The Great Bear Rainforest, located along British Columbia's central and north coast, is one of the world's largest coastal



▲ Bears supplement their diets with rose hips and berries after feasting on salmon.

temperate rainforests. Coastal rainforests are unique due to their proximity to oceans and mountains as well as receiving high amounts of rainfall. This combination creates some of the most ecologically diverse regions in the world.

Sadly enough, this rainforest used to stretch all the way from southeast Alaska and down the Pacific coast to northern California. More than half of it has been logged, clear-cut and developed, destroying habitat and endangering wildlife. The largest remaining tract lies in the region known as the Great Bear Rainforest, which sits on a thin band stretching almost 300 miles from the northern edge of Vancouver Island to Alaska's southernmost coast encompassing 28,000 square miles of which less than 9,000 square miles are protected.

Surrounded by jagged mountains and hundreds of fjords that lead to the Pacific Ocean, this moss-laden rainforest is home to some of the world's most majestic trees

## Exploring the Great Bear Rainforest

You can get a feel for the area by taking the B.C. Discovery Coast Passage ferry in the summer, or the B.C. Inside Passage ferry to Prince Rupert. From these ferries, you're likely to see some of the marine life that also makes up part of the Great Bear Rainforest area. Both ferries lead to ports where you can book wildlife viewing tours. Visit [www.bcferries.com/](http://www.bcferries.com/) for ferry fares, schedules, and links to lodging and tours. Visit [www.tourismprincerupert.com/](http://www.tourismprincerupert.com/) to get info on what's available from Prince Rupert.

You can also get a taste of the area via the Alaska Marine Highway System. Its ferries sail along the Inside Passage between Bellingham and Alaska. This is another great way to view some of the area's marine life. Visit [www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/index.html](http://www.dot.state.ak.us/amhs/index.html) for more info.

One way to see the grizzly bears of the area is to take a bear viewing excursion. Several tours depart from Vancouver Island, B.C. Several floating fishing lodges also offer wildlife viewing excursions. Visit [www.vancouverisland.com/](http://www.vancouverisland.com/) to get more information.

To learn more about the Great Bear Rainforest in general, visit [www.raincoast.org](http://www.raincoast.org).



▲ A fresh grizzly bear track along one of the many salmon bearing streams in the Great Bear Rainforest.





▲ Grizzly bears often stand on piles of logs strewn along the streams to get a better view of the salmon in the streams below.

would look vastly different, for salmon directly and indirectly benefit more than 190 different species of plants and animals.

Bears and wolves eat their fish in the safety of the forest, leaving the carcasses on the ground when they're finished. Smaller mammals and birds feast on the remains. Then the bones break down, nourishing the soil and providing important nutrients the trees and vegetation need to grow.

As for the salmon, the rainforest provides the ideal setting — the cool water temperatures needed to spawn. The shaded streams and rivers of the rainforest offer the perfect spawning grounds for six species of salmon that return here each year, including Coho, Chinook, Sockeye, Pink, Chum, and Steelhead. Salmon runs provide an almost continuous supply of food during the late summer and fall, particularly for bears preparing for hibernation. Meanwhile, the new salmon eggs hatch, and eventually the fingerlings head to the sea, continuing a cycle that's been in existence for the past 10,000 years.

— some tower over 300 feet high, measure 19 feet in diameter, and are more than 1,000 years old — including Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, red cedars and hemlocks.

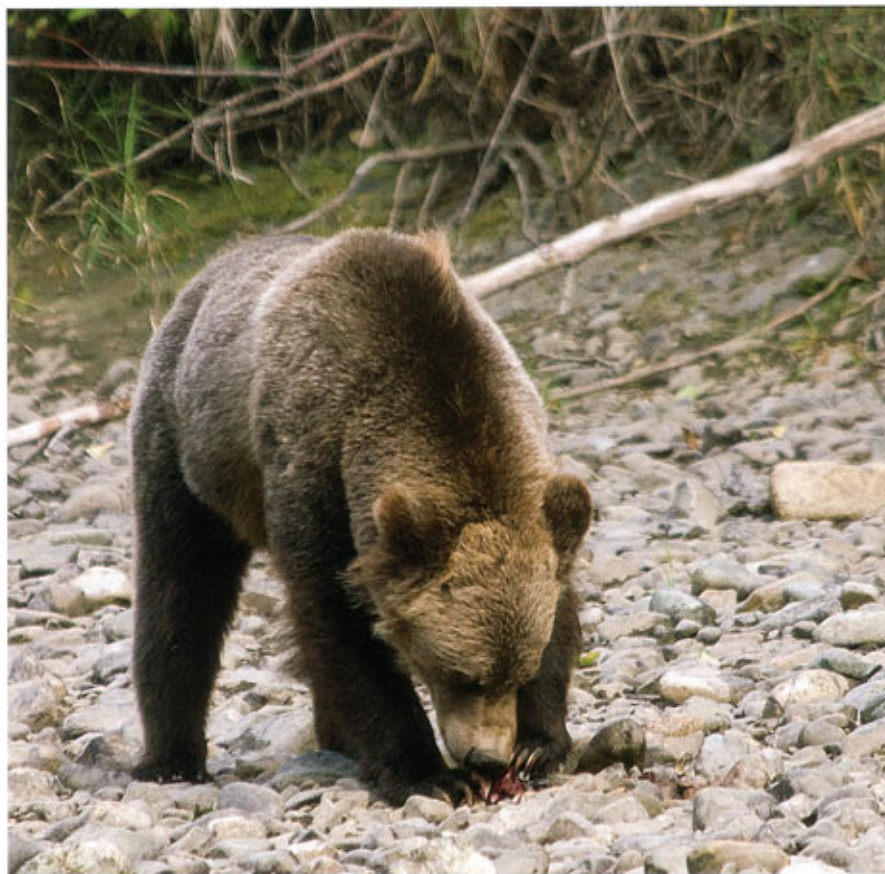
A thriving understory consists of thick layers of ferns, thorny Devil's Club, and skunk cabbage. Bushes are filled with salmonberries, thimbleberries, and wild rose hips. Wild lilies and orchids are also found here.

More than 140 bird and animal species call the Great Bear Rainforest home, including three species of bears: grizzly, black, and the rare Kermode, a white-coated version of the black bear. Wolves, moose, mountain lions, elk, deer, and a myriad of smaller wildlife such as otters, martens, flying squirrels, and mink live here, too. Eagles, a variety of owls, bats, woodpeckers, and various songbirds fill the forests, while more than 6 million birds migrate through the area each year.

### The fish that keep the forest alive

At the heart of this mighty forest is the wild salmon, one of the most important species to be found in the rainforest. Without salmon, this region

Most bears will investigate fresh salmon carcasses lying on the river rock in hopes of a quick meal. ▼





## Let the feast begin

Grizzly bears can be seen at any time of year from spring through autumn; the best viewing locations depend on what food sources are available at the time. In spring, fresh out of hibernation, grizzlies head for the sedges of the estuaries and the grassy valley bottoms where they feed on green shoots and the roots of plants such as skunk cabbage, using their claws to dig up the starchy foods.

In summer the bears continue to feast on different types of greenery, adding in berries and salmon — the first smaller salmon runs occur in late June or early July.

When it comes to grizzly bears, fall offers a great time to observe them

as they congregate to feed on spawning salmon during the major salmon runs. The protein-rich diet gives the bears their most beautiful coats of the season, as well as the fat reserves needed to get them through winter.

Hibernation begins in October or November and can last until April or May. The bears typically travel into higher elevations to find dens — old tree logs or large rocks — where they hole up for the winter.

For female grizzly bears, or sows, hibernation is the time they give birth to cubs, typically in January or February. The tiny cubs, weighing in at about one pound each, rely on their mother's protein-rich milk to boost their weight



▲ Each grizzly bear has its own method of fishing — this one eyes the salmon swimming by before diving.



▲ This grizzly bear sow shows its cub how to fish for spawning salmon, although this very young cub seems more interested in paddling around than catching fish.



to about five or six pounds when they leave the den. The cubs continue to nurse during the summer and often into their second summer. Cubs spend two or three years with their mother, denning with her each winter and becoming almost full-grown before they finally go out on their own. During those years, their mother teaches them where to find the best food sources, and teaches them her unique fishing techniques, likely handed down generation after generation.

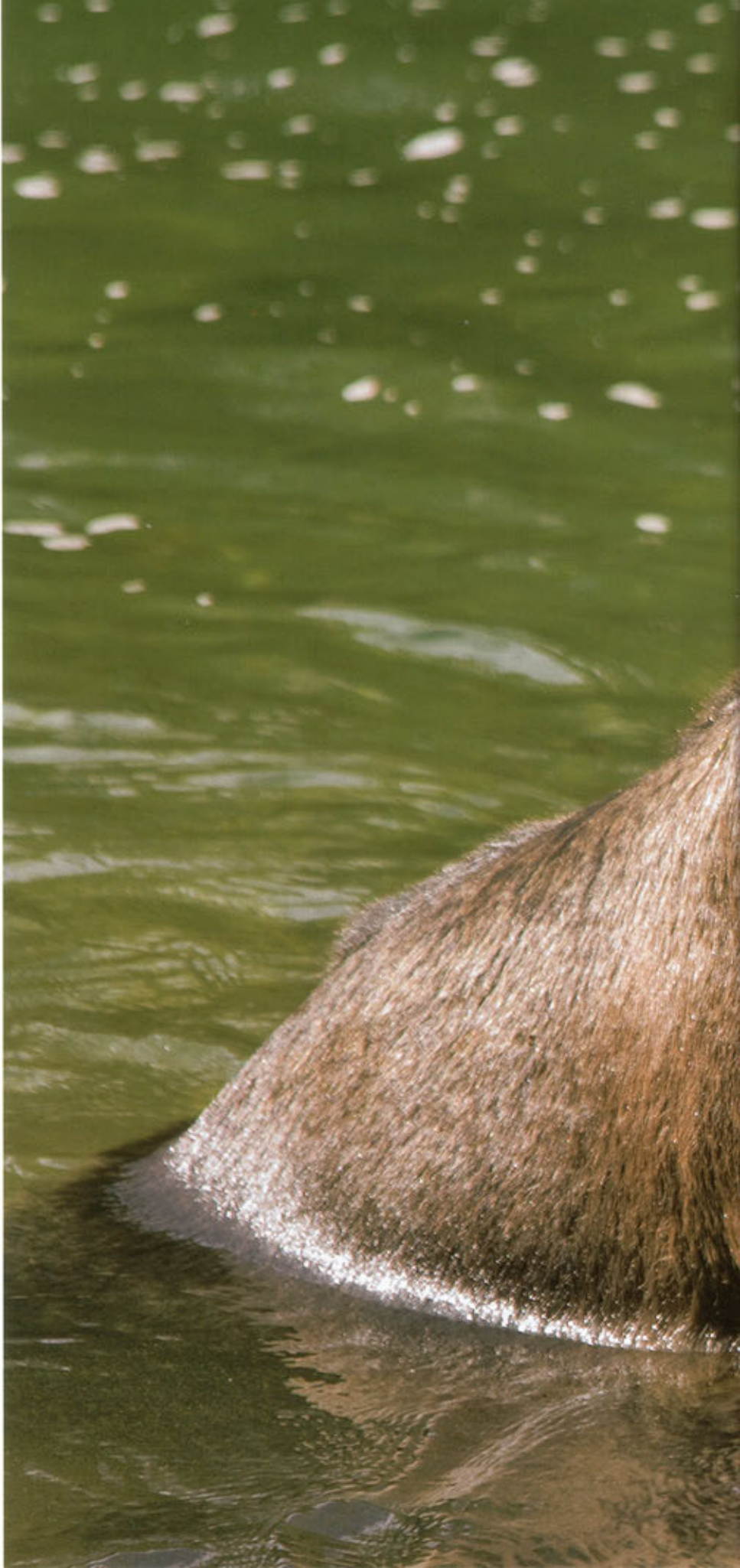
Those fishing techniques vary greatly. For instance, some bears spend much of their time walking along the shores of a stream, eyeing the jumping salmon, and making a mad dash into the water at the last minute. Some bears stand on logs and rocks, silently watching the fish before deciding what their next move will be. Yet other bears put in lots of time searching among shallow pools near submerged logs to find salmon that get stuck.

Some bears snorkel for fish, putting their head under water and watching for fish swimming below them. Powerfully kicking their legs to move underwater, sometimes the only things you see sticking out of the water are their ears and a bit of fur on their backs. I've even seen grizzlies dive farther down, their back legs kicking in the air as they attempt to go deeper.

Still other bears are noisy when it comes to fishing. They splash and jump at the salmon, using their full weight to jump on the fish. As with the first bear I saw in the rainforest, sometimes you hear them coming long before you see them.

When it comes to cubs, watching them learn to fish can be fascinating, providing rare opportunities to see other unique behaviors. One fall, I was fortunate enough to watch a set of first-year cubs play while their protective mother fished along the stream. The roly-poly cubs, stunningly beautiful with long mottled blondish fur, were obviously well fed and just about ready for hibernation. They looked like low-to-the-ground furry tanks, being almost as wide as they were tall.

The mother led her cubs along the stream, and at one point, entered the water and started splashing around as she searched for tasty salmon. The cubs made several attempts to climb onto some huge







Grizzly bears sometimes sit down in the middle of the stream and wait for the fish to swim by.





▲ A brave cub jumps right in to learn how to fish while its sibling waits onshore.

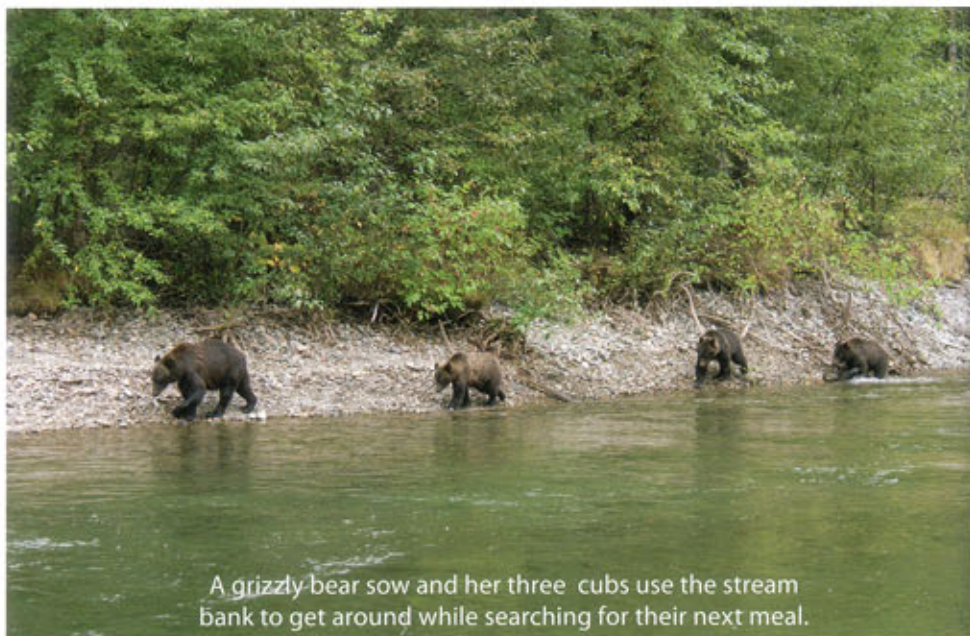
downed trees, finally succeeding, then sat down to watch their mother. Eventually, one cub got bored, tumbled off the log, and decided to brave the water. The other cub quickly sat back down on its haunches and watched the action from the shore, obviously not interested in getting wet.

Meanwhile, the mother picked up fish carcasses from the stream, sniffed each one, then dropped them back into the water. Eventually, she found a fresh fish and plunked down in the middle of the stream, pulling the fish apart with her long claws. Her cub immediately became interested, swimming over to her and grabbing one end of the fish in its paws, pulling as hard as it could in a game of tug-of-war. The sow growled, but didn't appear overly concerned.

Finally, the cub tired of the game, and after swimming around a bit more, both the sow and cub got out of the water. In no time at all, the wet cub found a sandy pile of dirt next to a big log and proceeded to roll in it with

great glee. The sow and the other cub waited for a few seconds, then started to waddle back into the forest. Eventually the sand-covered cub stood up from its rolling, looking rather dazed, then

shook itself off. It didn't take the cub long to figure out that its mother and sibling had moved into the forest, so it scrambled over a big log, and scurried after them.



A grizzly bear sow and her three cubs use the stream bank to get around while searching for their next meal.



Later that day, I watched a sow and three almost full-grown cubs fish along the same stream. These bears looked healthy and fat, with dark coats of thick fur. Seeing four big bears at once was quite the thrill. At one point, the whole family stopped to rest on a gravel bar directly across the stream from me.

Suddenly the three cubs looked up at the same time, noses pointing toward the other side of the stream. To my surprise, the sow and the two small cubs I had watched earlier in the day were making their way back along the stream. Bears will often work the same stream, going downstream for a few hours, then working their way back upstream later in the day. Apparently, the mother and her two young cubs had done that after cutting through the forest.

I was interested in what these two families would do when the sows became aware of each other. Grizzly bear sows are very protective of their offspring, but often show more tolerance for other sows with

cubs. This situation seemed a bit different since the bear with two small cubs was about to encounter a sow with very large, almost adult, cubs that could easily kill the smaller ones.

**"In the long silence that followed ... I realized why it's so important that the grizzlies, the salmon, and the rainforest be preserved."**

Sure enough, the two sows warily eyed each other for a few minutes, both hesitating to make a move. After a bit of a standoff, the sow with the two younger cubs turned around, headed up the bank, and walked into the forest. I watched the little family stop at the edge of a clearing and look back at the other bears.

Eventually the sow and her three cubs lost interest, and began to make their way upstream. With the danger over, the sow with the two small cubs walked out of the forest and returned to the stream. They continued walking along its banks, the cubs waddling the whole way, and finally rounded a bend where I could no longer watch their journey.

In the long silence that followed, broken only by the gurgling stream and the splashing salmon, I realized why it's so important that the grizzlies, the salmon, and the rainforest be preserved. I'm afraid we might look back in a few decades and discover these beautiful creatures have disappeared forever because we didn't take care of their habitat. I don't want to be part of a generation that says, "We could have done something to stop this, but we didn't." Rather, I believe we must work to preserve the rainforest and make sure that in the future we can say, "We had the opportunity to get this right ... and we did." ▶



▲ The grizzly bear sow surrounded by her almost full-grown cubs. The cubs will den with her again in the winter before going off on their own the following summer.