

A large brown grizzly bear stands on a rocky riverbank. The bear's fur is thick and brown, with some snow on its chest and paws. The background is a blurred river with a rocky shore.

BY TERESA EARLE • PHOTOS BY FRITZ MUELLER

**It happens each
autumn on a river in the
deepest Yukon:
a remarkable gathering
of grizzlies.**

VALLEY OF THE BEARS

**Now, a landmark
conservation effort is
protecting this awesome
convergence –
and allowing humans to
witness it firsthand.**



“It’s minus-20, there’s open water, and these frosty grizzlies loom out of the ice fog. It’s an incredible place.” **FRITZ MUELLER**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A grizzly sow takes a spawning chum salmon from the Fishing Branch River in the northwestern Yukon. • Far from the nearest road or town, the Fishing Branch pierces the boreal wilds and winds past Bear Cave Mountain. • A bull caribou from the Porcupine herd crosses the Fishing Branch. • From a respectful distance, a photographer waits for the perfect shot of a grizzly bear. • A bear paws at a chum salmon carcass. • Phil Timpany of Bear Cave Mountain Eco-Adventures strolls beneath big spruces at the visitor camp.

After leaving Dawson City and helicoptering across the frozen wilderness of the northern Yukon for two hours, the first hint of the strange ecology of Bear Cave Mountain is hard to miss. “There are spruce trees bigger than anywhere in the Yukon,” says guide Phil Timpany, stretching his arms out wide. “It’s like being in a hemlock forest.”

Near the base of a mountain, the spartan, snow-glazed landscape transitions to dense woods. A steaming river slices through the forest. It’s called the Fishing Branch, and in October, just shy of the Arctic Circle, it flows free, through a wilderness otherwise locked in ice.

The chilly landscape is still. Then, three fat grizzly bears lumber out of the forest and splash into the river. Their winter pelts are thick with frost, and blood is caked on their lips. The chum are spawning, and it’s dinnertime on the Fishing Branch.

What, exactly, explains the curious phenomena along the Fishing Branch? Why do grizzlies converge so dependably at Bear Cave Mountain each autumn? Why have a First Nation and the Yukon government joined hands to protect this place, and why are well-heeled visitors now travelling here?

According to Timpany – a Whitehorse-based bear expert, guide and filmmaker who’s been visiting the area since 1991 – the answer is simple: the Fishing Branch is no ordinary river. Thermal springs percolate from the limestone karst beneath the mountain, warming the nearby river and keeping it flowing year round. Moreover, the porous karst makes for remarkable water, filtering and oxygenating the river’s flow.

Under such conditions, salmon eggs thrive – and thus, so does the whole food chain. “A lot of highly productive salmon areas are associated with karst,” Timpany explains. “When I see

bears, wolves and wolverines [eating dead salmon] here in mid-winter, it all relates to water quality – it’s what makes this little biological piece of work happen.”

This “little biological piece of work” leads to a pretty big spectacle. Against a backdrop of worn mountains, far from the nearest road, up to 50 grizzly bears visit each fall. They stroll up and down the snowy riverbanks, eyes following the chum salmon that swim here from the Bering Sea to spawn. Winter closes in by mid-October, and if the conditions are right, the massing grizzlies are transformed into “ice bears.” In the freezing air they become coated with frozen dreadlocks, which tinkle like chandeliers as they patrol the river.

By late October, the remarkable event is over and the sated bears make their way upslope to den in caves on the craggy flanks of Bear Cave Mountain. Last fall, the Yukon’s Fritz Mueller became one of the first photographers to visit the Fishing Branch and document the ice bears first-hand. He was impressed. “It’s minus-20, there’s open water, and these frosty grizzlies loom out of the ice fog,” he says. “It’s an incredible place.”

THE VUNTUT GWITCHIN WOULD AGREE. Appropriately, to them, the Fishing Branch is *Ni’iinlii njik*: where salmon spawn. The First Nations people of the northern Yukon, the Vuntut hold this place sacred. To protect the river and its animals and plants, they worked with the territorial government to establish Fishing Branch Ni’iinlii Njik Territorial Park in 1999. At 6,500 square kilometres, it’s the biggest territorial park in the Yukon.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A sow and her yearling cub take a break from feasting on salmon on the icy Fishing Branch River. In September and October as many as 50 bears gather here to gorge on spawning chum. • Toting a shotgun just in case, Phil Timpany peers into a cave that bears use for denning on the slopes of the appropriately named Bear Cave Mountain. • A bear patrols the riverbank at sunset. • Grizzlies move into their dens once the late-autumn salmon run ends and food in the northern Yukon becomes scarce. • Thrashing in the shallows, a sow pursues a runaway chum.



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“It’s the first time in Canada, if not North America, that a First Nation has made a significant contribution to conservation by including its own [privately held] lands,” says Yukon Parks director Erik Val. The ecological core of the park consists of two parts. Yukon Parks manages an ecological reserve on the west side of the Fishing Branch River, while the Vuntut retain settlement lands surrounding Bear Cave Mountain on the east side.

Until recently, though, few people even in the Yukon were familiar with Fishing Branch Park. That began to change when the Vuntut Development Corporation partnered with Timpany to develop an exclusive tourist operation on the river. Last year they launched Bear Cave Mountain Eco-Adventures.

Timpany and the Vuntut are counting on the unusual natural conditions of the Fishing Branch to lure bear enthusiasts willing to fork over \$9,500 to spend a week in September or

October watching grizzlies. No more than four guests and one guide are allowed at the modest riverside camp at one time.

Of course, you don’t have to come to the Yukon to see grizzlies chasing salmon. It’s a scene that plays out throughout coastal Alaska and B.C. But according to tourism promoters and park officials, Bear Cave Mountain is different. “This is an inland bear-viewing operation at the Arctic Circle,” notes Val. “We are by far the most restrictive [viewing place]. Its remoteness has given us an effective means to manage access, which is in real contrast to other bear-viewing operations, many of which started as privately owned fishing operations.”

STORIES ARE PHIL TIMPANY’S SPECIALTY, and though he’s a noted bear expert with a depth of knowledge about ursine behaviour, he’s quick to redirect attention to what he considers

the essential stories of Bear Cave Mountain: the ecological and cultural significance of a place where bears and salmon meet in the Far North. Though he’s spent a career racking up bear encounters, he downplays the tales people tell about grizzlies.

“I remember feeling those first-time rushes from being close to bears. But I got to know this experience over a very long period of time, and now when I go in with people [who are seeing bears up close for the first time], they’re not feeling what I’m feeling,” he says. Instead, he says, he’s thinking about the bears as individuals he’s come to know over many years, wondering about their families or their relationships with other bears.

“The bears have such varied personalities, but all bears have the same nature,” maintains Timpany. “They’re very forgiving and very passive. They’re intelligent and tolerant – they’re really not interested in getting into trouble with you. They determine the distance. That’s why I believe the risk is very slight with our commercial enterprise.”

“Phil is very knowledgeable, and he’s careful and respectful of the bears,” says Mueller, praising Timpany’s guiding skills. “The bears are used to seeing people at certain sites along the river. So even when the bears come really close, they just ignore you and go about their business looking for fish.”

“I’d love to go back,” adds Mueller, still awed at being so close to sows and cubs. “It’s not every day you get to have a bear cub nosing around near you while its mother chows on salmon over by the river. There’s a magic at Bear Cave Mountain.”