

Essay

Learning to fit in, in peace

BY GAY BRADSHAW

Charlie Russell and I worked 10 years together writing a book about his seven decades living with bears. He was—and still is—regarded as the world’s grizzly expert. We’d talk two, sometimes three, times a week, batting ideas about things bear back and forth. Sometimes neither of us had many words to share. The ideas we were trying to communicate to policy-makers and the public about the real, wonderful nature of bears were so simple and straightforward, words were inadequate. Similar to love and truth, bears don’t need words.

When I called, Charlie would pick up the phone, and then, unless the weather was too fierce, step onto the porch of his cabin in Alberta’s mountains. I’d hear the screen door bang shut, then a chorus of voices—a nuthatch chirping, a jay squawking, or some other winged neighbor celebrating the day. Other times, Charlie would tell me what and who he was seeing, like the recent male puma.

Cougars weren’t uncommon there. Invisible to the careless eye, their golden form weaves through grassy contours below the cabin. One time Charlie called, bursting with joy, to report that he had come across a pair of bouncing cougar kittens at play.

Today’s cougar, however, was a full-grown adult. He had been hanging around the cabin, laying low in the shelter of a nearby grove, obviously ailing.

Charlie decided to help the big cat, so he put out some meat. He felt for him. Similar to grizzlies, cougars need to scavenge on occasion because of foodstuffs made scarce by white settlement. In this case, human intervention came as a saving grace for the injured cougar. The substitute fare that Charlie put out seemed to do the trick. In a few days, the cougar was back on his feet, thin, but capable.

When you wait and watch, and wait, quiet, and wait some more, Charlie’d say, you see things you would never see otherwise. When you wait and listen for no other reason than to learn and hear nature’s pulse, you become part of the landscape, blend in, fit in, and start to pick up on the inside world of animals. This really was Charlie’s point and foundational to what he called “paying attention.” Being able to fit in with bears and their world meant listening and looking at what nature served up, not only studying what is interesting.

One day, I asked Charlie, “After all the years living so close to nature’s bones, what is one essential lesson you have learned?” The jay called and a woodpecker knocked

a few times before he answered. “If I could only use one word to describe nature, I’d say ‘gentle.’ Nature is gentle.”

You wouldn’t think that, given where he grew up, with the eyes of Canada’s formidable Front Range staring straight at him, Charlie would regard nature as “gentle.” Alberta’s cold weather and harsh winds are legendary, the kind that make up round-the-campfire tales of woe and hardship. He and his pioneer family certainly had their share of nail-biting stories like the time his grandparents came home from the store to find their house blown off its foundations and sitting smack in the middle of the creek. Or when Charlie and his brother, when they were about seven or eight years old, got caught up in a blizzard white-out, snowshoeing from school and almost didn’t make it home. But, Charlie insisted, nature is gentle and, he added, unlike a lot of humans, fair.

Nature is not out to get you, Charlie’d say. Cougars, wolves, rattlesnakes, bears, bees, and other wildlife are not out to get you. They are trying to eke out a living just like anyone else—except they came here long before we did. He’s right. Our wildlife family is what made this valley so beautiful and peaceful. To restore the peace, we need



Charlie Russell with a wild grizzly. Photo: Tom Ellison.

to take a page from Charlie’s book and learn how to fit in with the land, fit in with the bears, cougars, and all the other animals who grace this heaven on Earth.

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