

Eaten Alive

IN THE HEART OF THE GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MATT WHELAN // MATTWHELAN.CA



IN MOMENTS LIKE THESE, in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest, it's hard to feel anything at all, except sorry for a salmon.

All wild animals earn a hard living, but no other species in its life seems to endure such a diverse and unrelenting gauntlet as the salmon. From the time that a salmon is conceived, to the time that it dies, and for some time after that, something, wherever it may be, will be trying to eat it.

Let's pretend, just briefly, that *you're* a salmon egg, in the gravel of a river, somewhere in the rainforest, where somehow, for the last few months, you've survived torrential rains, a shifting riverbed, and the scavenging efforts of winter's hunters. Snakes, at this stage, are particularly keen.

Let's say that you hatch successfully into a little alevin, with a tiny little yolk sac to get you by for the next few weeks, and let's say you survive long enough to become a fry. You're an inch or two long now, a perfect little snack for herons, kingfishers, and loons.

Let's suppose you haven't been eaten yet, and you've survived the months it takes, feeding on insects, to become a smolt, a male smolt, we'll say, for this exercise. And let's say that you, this male smolt, live long enough to get big enough to attempt a trip to the open ocean.

Right. Ready?

There's safety in numbers, so you'll be traveling in as large a posse as possible, hundreds of you at the same time, an en-masse seaward migration, and a ripe target for gulls, big squawking flocks of them, hunting you down in their ungainly but very efficient way.

Seeing as we've come this far, let's imagine that you've been lucky, and you make it to the open ocean.

You'll be spending the next few years out there, foraging endlessly for smaller fish, while a dizzying and comprehensive multitude of predators forage for you. Killer whales, sea lions, seals, dolphins, whales, and sharks; trollers, trawlers, long liners and jiggers.

There are other problems too, fish farms and oil rigs, climate change, ocean acidification and pollution.

As unlikely as it seems, you survive all this, and now you're about four or five years old, and something in-

side tells you it's time to go home. Home to the very river, in fact, in which you were born. No one's really sure how you do this. How *do* you find this single river mouth on a coastline tens of thousands of miles long? Some say that you steer by the earth's magnetic fields, others say that the river you're looking for has a distinct smell. Actually, no one's at all sure why it's so critical that it be the *very same* river in which you were born. But anyway, it's obviously important to you, and you've been thousands of miles out at sea for many years, enduring all manner of struggle, so however you do it, and whatever your reasons, well done.

So, there you are, at the mouth of this river in which you were born, and let's say that over the years you've been gone, that this river hasn't been dammed, or destroyed by logging or landslides. Let's assume too, that sufficient rain has fallen—not too much mind you, those waterfalls and rapids can get nasty—but just enough to swell the river to a navigable level.

Your chances of having survived this far are incredibly slim, but you're not done yet. Not nearly. You're going to want to swim up that river, past the gillnetters and the sea lions near the estuary, past the gaping mouths of bears at waterfalls, past eagles swooping from the cedars, and wolves prowling the banks.

It's a lousy welcome home, but let's suppose you survive it.

Oh, I almost forgot. You've gone through a bit of a change. The smooth blue-silver scales of your youth are now a green and burgundy battle swatch. Your svelte, bullet-like lines have gone too, and now there's an ugly bump in your back and your jaw has extended forward, gnarled upwards, and a craggy set of dog-like teeth now protrude at uneven angles from your swollen gums. To boot, the trip up the river has left you battered and scarred, by rock and rival fish alike. You look like some sort

of aquatic werewolf, suspended in transition. You are, quite frankly, grotesque.

You're in the top percentile now, an elite group of survivors, and you're ready, finally, to spawn.

You know what you're looking for. She'll be by her redd, a divot she's carved out in the riverbed with her own tattered tail. With just a bit more luck, she'll be leaving eggs in there for you to fertilize, and spending the very short remainder of her own life defending them. Her affections will not be easily won. You've other males to fight off first. You'll be shredding each other up with those vicious little teeth you've all grown just for the job.

Surely, you're too tired to fight. Seeing as we've come this far, let's say you're not. Let's say that you fight, and let's say that you win this final fight, and you're preparing, just now, and for want, perhaps, of more erotic language, to release your milt.

It would be unfair, don't you think, if after such a long and hard existence, and just seconds before achieving life's unifying and possibly solitary purpose of self-perpetuation, that you would be snatched from the water and eaten alive by a big white bear.

Most people will never see a spirit bear, but many of those that have, have seen them here, at Riordan Creek, on Gribbell Island, in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest.

One of Canada's true treasures, the Great Bear stretches along the West Coast from the northern end of Vancouver Island to the Alaskan border. It's twice the size of Belgium; a huge, sprawling fortress of old-growth forest, impenetrable shoreline, and rare wildlife.

It is one of the world's magic places. On some moonless nights in the Great Bear Rainforest, the northern lights dance against the unhindered brilliance of the Milky Way while feeding fish kick up clouds of phosphorescence in the blackness of the still sea. In the distant darkness, it's not uncommon to hear the blows of humpback whales and the howls of wolves.

By day, bears hunt salmon in the waterways of the forest.



It's also Gitg'at territory, a people that have been around here for thousands of years.

Marven Robinson, of the Gitg'at Nation, was born and raised in nearby Hartley Bay, and has been bringing people to Riordan Creek to watch bears for more than 20 years.

We were talking, as strangers often do, about the weather, and strangers in the Great Bear Rainforest, often talk about rain.

"Lotta rain been fallin'," said Marven.

"Yep," I said, "and more coming I hear."

"Yep," said Marven.

"Yep," I said.

And we stood like that for a while. Watching the river. In the rain.

As a matter of fact, there'd been a torrential downpour a couple of nights ago, and at Cameron Cove, not far from where we were, a landslide had taken out an entire river. The rubble, Marven was saying, was scattered with hundreds of dead fish, a complete run wiped out by heavy rain and shifting earth.

"That's a lot of dead fish," said Marven.

"Yep," I said.

"Yep," said Marven.

The salmon, mostly pinks and some chum, were splashing about in golden brown pools. The grass on the banks had been laid out flat by the weight of dining bears, and flies buzzed around the dozens of fish carcasses strewn like rotten rags about the rocks.

I was telling Marven that I'd never seen a spirit bear.

"Never seen a spirit bear, eh?" said Marven.

"Nope," I said.

"Huh," said Marven.



THIS IS THE ONLY place in the world where some black bears are white. White black bears are often called spirit bears, or Kermode bears, and of the roughly 150,000 black bears living in British Columbia, only a hundred or so wear white fur, and they all live here, in the Great Bear.

Biologists will tell you that it's just a genetic anomaly, that for some reason, eons ago, a gene mutated, and now about ten percent of the bears here are born white. In local legend (which is always a lot more fun) Raven, who had turned the world green after the age of ice, wanted a reminder of that erstwhile time, when all the world was silver, and it was Raven that decided that every tenth bear would be white.

In the old days, if you saw a spirit bear, you were to keep it to yourself. If you were lucky enough to see one, it was a sacred secret. These days an ecotourism industry exists (as do petty, corporate bickerings over the trademarking of the 'Spirit Bear' name) and it's hard to keep a shared sighting secret.

These days most experienced guides call spirit bears white bears. Marven calls them white bears. A voice crackled over the radio. A white bear was on its way up the river.

Marven keyed his mic to talk.

"Do up the suit real tight," he said. "There's a fella here never seen a white bear."

In the distance, I could see the animal moving deftly up the river towards us, pausing every now and then to look into a pool.

"That's Boss!" whispered Marven.

"I know," I whispered back. "So cool!"

"No," whispered Marven. "The bear's name is Boss."

Boss's name is Boss because he's the boss about this part of the river. He took over about four years ago, displacing the dominant male at the time, Scarface, who, one assumes, got *his* name gaining and retaining this dominance.

Until there was a new boss.

Boss came closer and closer, and paused on the opposite bank, about thirty feet away, and turned towards us.

And that's when he saw you, this ragged, battered fish, already nearing your final throes.

What you might not want to know, is the ease with which he took you. The bear, already plump from gorging on so many of your kindred, just waddled along the bank, took a sharp turn, made a quick, effortless pounce into the river, and dragged you out before skulking back into the forest to eat its snatched snack like a bad dog leaving the scene of an unattended dinner table.

It was awesome, with all the weight that the word once carried, and I forgot, just for a second, to feel sorry for the salmon. ◉