

The Grizzly Beat Podcast

Interview with Charlie Russell

Transcript

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Louisa Willcox, Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox and I'm here with a dear friend Charlie Russell. Charlie Russell is a grizzly bear expert; he's a filmmaker and author of numerous articles and books, including *Grizzly Heart: Living without Fear Among the Brown Bears of Kamchatka* and *Spirit Bear: Encounters with the White Bear of the Western Rainforest*. Charlie is the subject of an award winning BBC film, "The Bear Man of Kamchatka" and with his partner Maureen Enns, Charlie filmed the documentary "Walking with Giants the Grizzlies of Siberia". Charlie and Maureen are the only people known to have successfully raised 10 orphan grizzly bear cubs, this in Russia, and to have returned them to the wild. Charlie lives on his family's ranch near Waterton Park, Alberta.

Charlie, you've had amazing intimate experiences with grizzly bears in Canada, Alaska, Russia, other places, and many refer to you as the bear whisperer. How and when did the whispering begin for you?

Charlie Russell: I live among grizzly bears on a beautiful ranch that I own now but that was homesteaded by my grandfather 110 years ago. It's on the edge of Waterton Lakes National Park. There are more grizzlies here now than there were back when I was a kid but still, there were often bears around here, so I just got used to being around them and watching them. And I really enjoyed them as most people do when they get to watch these animals in a situation where they're not afraid and especially if you're not afraid then it's a beautiful experience -- and that started a long time ago with me.

But I don't like to call myself a bear whisperer. I don't like to call myself anything actually, because when you form questions -- you need to form questions around things and if you identify yourself as something then you're asking what is the bear whisperer do in this situation, or what have you, instead of really looking for answers, so no, I'm just a person and I like bears, I always have for a long time, and that's where I got started.

GT: You managed your family's ranch near Waterton for 18 years or so and you figured out how to make peace between cows and grizzly bears. How did you do that?

CR Again, it was an idea because I liked grizzly bears. I saw that there were a lot of things that were said about them that weren't true in reference to people. When was ranching, I thought that might be also the case with bears and cows. So, I decided to let them feel welcome on my place to see what would happen. And I didn't believe that I would lose a lot of cows, so I wouldn't care if I was stupid about it, but I just wanted to understand what would happen. And I had opportunities to watch them with my cows too, and it was quite remarkable what would happen. Bears, that is not to say that grizzlies do not kill cattle, they do, but it doesn't happen very often. In those days, there were a few expert wildlife people who worked for the government that could

remove bears that did kill cattle and they did it very skillfully. This isn't the case anymore. There are not very many skilled people working for Fish and Wildlife or whatever. And so, if they get started killing, it can be a problem.

So anyway, it's been a complicated situation, but I also decided that these animals could be fed my dead stock. I wasn't a perfect rancher, so I had a few dead animals around and I would put them up next to the Waterton National Park boundary and so that the bears could find them when they came out of the den and have something to eat in a time when there wasn't a lot for them to eat. I thought that it would be similar to the times when bison were everywhere and winters were sometimes hard on bison, so grizzlies when they came out of their den would have lots of bison to eat, and so I didn't see anything different from that.

It wasn't too popular an idea amongst my neighboring ranchers. They thought that I would teach the bears to eat cattle and kill live ones if they got a taste for dead ones. I didn't think that that was necessarily going to be true, because there is a lot of grazing done during the summer up next the mountains in grizzly habitat and cows die, and nobody took those away from the bears, so there was no real effort to remove dead stock during the summer, so why worry about it teaching them to eat live cows during the winter?

Anyways, this went on for the whole time that I was ranching, which was 18 years here and it seemed to work very well. Other ranchers would give me their dead stock, and I would put them up next to the Park and then because they realized that there were less bears coming east into their calving yards and so they could see that it was helpful, eventually they could see that it was helpful. And then Fish and Wildlife started doing it with road-kill deer and elk and moose later, after I stopped in the same area and it worked quite well for.

It isn't still working because now there are more grizzlies and ranchers are worried that part of the reason that there are more grizzlies on their places is that this dead stock thing is giving bears more to eat and therefore can raise more cubs and put more pressure on them, these bears on their land which they're not used to now.

GT: Charlie, in your book Grizzly Heart, you describe an interesting experience with a female grizzly bear that you called Mouse on the British Columbia coast that suggested to you the possibility of an even deeper connection with grizzly bears, and it seems to have set you off in a different direction -- and eventually to Russia. Maybe you can share what happened there and where that took you.

CR: Yeah, my interest in grizzly bears eventually took over my activities. I quit ranching and I wanted to really understand this animal. There weren't a lot of opportunities to do this but one was guiding bear viewing people that want to see grizzly bears rather than shooting them, and it was a business that was just getting going on the west coast of British Columbia. It had been happening in Alaska for quite a long time. And anyway, I got guiding bear viewers and it was in the first grizzly sanctuary in Canada -- and is still there only grizzly sanctuary in Canada, north of Prince Rupert, in a beautiful inlet -- and the authorities didn't really understand how to do this. They put the same people that were in charge of the Parks and bear viewing as were setting the hunting regulations and so it didn't really connect with me how they wanted this and then I

became a, I don't know, a problem to them, I think, because they would set rules like you can't let a bear within closer than 150 meters from people, that you have to get your clients out of there if this happens, and this I know this was creating bears' curiosity. When they saw us moving away from them they would want to run towards us because they could see "oh, I'm moving these people".

And anyway it soon was obvious that you couldn't do that. So I would allow some bears that were the ones that really wanted to, and they were usually the ones that were the young ones that were recently weaned maybe, and they would see that they would get protection from bigger bears if they were close to humans. And I started allowing that to happen, and there was one female that was particularly curious and friendly and she would come running if sometimes I was showing, and it was beautiful and people just loved this bear. She was extremely friendly and entertaining because we were often in a zodiac and she would come up right close, show her, and find a water log or a rock or something and start playing with it, splashing -- and often splashing the people right in the boat, she was that close. It was hugely entertaining and people loved it and anyways, this bear, I only had one opportunity to be really close myself.

I was always with people and one time there was a party that didn't come, and so I had some spare time and I wandered in the bush with her in the forest. This beautiful rainforest and my idea was that I was going to see how close she would come to me if I let her. By now I really trusted this bear. I was sitting on a log when she came along and got on the other end of the log and walked up the log towards me and she came quite tentatively because she was a bit curious and not sure her own self, but eventually she sat down right beside me on the log and allowed me to, I reached up and stroked the side of her nose. And she kind of opened her mouth and let me touch her teeth and I thought that was amazing. Then she opened her mouth farther and I was able to run my finger inside of her mouth and along her palate, which was a quite ridged palate, and it was mind blowing the trust that she had, and I guess that I had as well.

And that did change my life in a way. I just had to explore the limits of this trust and why certain bears could be trusted and why other bears couldn't be trusted. What was the whole dynamics between humans and bears became an obsession with me. I know there are dangerous bears out there, but why are they dangerous? And I set out to explore that as much as I could.

GT: So in 1996, you had the opportunity to go to Russia and the wilds of Kamchatka and you and your partner Maureen Ends built a cabin, and you adopted three tiny orphan grizzly bear cubs and you eventually released them into the wild. And no one had ever been known to do this before and many thought it was crazy and maybe you could share what experience was like.

CR: Yeah, that was quite a long time ago and might I remind you that I remember in 1993, late '93 I phoned you because I'd heard that you had been to Kamchatka and I wanted to understand what Kamchatka was all about, because I wanted to go myself. The Soviet Union had just fallen apart and I had known about bears as you probably had, the bears of Kamchatka for a long time. I wanted to know more about it and had the opportunity to explore what was going on with the poaching, with the new arrangement in Russia. And you set me up with a guy by the name of Igor Revenko and he just was an amazing man as you know and he really did look after us there.

He took us around the many to talk to many people and see many bears in an area where he was studying bears Kuril Lake down the southern peninsula.

So we stayed there among all these bears for over a week, I think 10 days and were living in this cabin with him and one of the campfire discussions I had told him about a study I wanted to do was immersing myself in a population of bears that were not interfered with by man, because I wanted to understand if it was possible to develop a trusting relationship with them. And I didn't want other people interfering. I didn't want them to be hunted one part of the year and then exposed to my behavior another part. I had tried to do this in North America but it wasn't a popular idea, because so much of our management of bears is to keep them fearful of people and people fearful of them. That's basically how we have decided in North America, to keep bears and people apart. And I of course didn't want to do that I wanted to see what would happen if we could be together, close and trusting of each other.

So nobody in North America would allow me to do that because they were spending lots of money to going the other direction. So when Igor heard about what I was trying to do, he said, "I know the perfect place for you, it's south of here. And nobody goes there it's kind of a tricky place, it's down near the Cape and the weather isn't all that great, so if you can survive the weather, it will be great," he said. Well, we were supposed to fly there but the weather wouldn't allow us before we left that year.

But I really trusted Igor and when he said that and he was open to it and he said that he could help me arrange that with authorities there we ended up going and it took two years to get organized to do this and find the money and everything.

It wasn't initially perfect because the bears did have a memory, for one thing during Soviet times they killed 60 bears, it was called the South Kamchatka Sanctuary and they killed 60 bears every year just for food often. So bears had a memory of being killed and so there were lots of bears who at Kambalnoye Lake area, right only about 30 miles from the tip of the peninsula, but they were quite fearful and so I thought: "Oh my gosh this isn't working." It was very hard to get the bears to even stick around long enough to have any kind of a pleasant experience with them.

But from Igor I heard about, he had taken us to the zoo and it was in an awful zoo, and the cubs were only kept in the zoo for a short period of time until they could hurt a kid, because kids could reach right in the cage and feed them, and that's what they did. They were invited to feed them. And so the bears were, the cubs were kept there while they were small but then as soon as they were big enough to hurt somebody, they would kill them. I got thinking, "Gosh if I could take these cubs from the zoo and release them, have them live here with us, that would be a pretty amazing way to explore the idea about, you can learn a lot about bears."

And anyway, the next year I spent the fall arranging that, and the next year, we got these three cubs that you mentioned, and it was the beginning of an amazing time because well bears aren't what you think they are. I knew they weren't and these cubs were the greatest teachers. For instance, I thought that I could be a hero and teach them what to eat. I knew I had to feed them. I knew the rule that because of the idea in North America that if I fed even though it was a small cub it would never forget that and it would be a dangerous bear forever, and that's why in North

America we had not allowed any rehabilitating of cubs, orphan cubs. And so with that challenge of how to feed them and then wean them from being fed and not to be dependent on feeding.

Anyways we would take them on walks every day and keep them in a pen at night, electrified pen, to keep them protected from other bears because there were a lot. There were about 400 bears there. They were certain ones, males, which were predators for cubs. So we'd take them for walks and the cubs were extremely quick on learning how, what to eat and what not.

They didn't wait around for me to tell them what to eat. They would explore and I would watch them eat, say hellebore, which I know is not really eaten by bears and it is a poison with us, oxalic acid. They would grab a mouthful, chomp on it and spit it out and then they wouldn't do it again. So they learned immediately. They knew what food to eat and what not to.

So, the other thing was the joy that they always seem to have. They were so much fun to be around and the joy would just sort of seep into your own bones and you couldn't help but be happy being around these animals. Anyways, so because I was there for 10 years, you can imagine the experiences that I had with these animals and what they taught me.

GT: And they would go off and den and then you'd come back the next summer, and they would pay you a visit and say hi?

CR: That's right. There was one thing that they understood that I couldn't do and that was be, that I couldn't den, I couldn't decide on their denning and so they had to den themselves. They had to find their own den and den themselves the first year. So before they were a year old, they were going on their own to find a den. I didn't help them. I couldn't help them with that. They had to do it on their own. So this was important part of this experiment of rehabilitating orphan cubs. Could they do that? And they would. They would disappear in a wild storm sometime in November. They were fat. I saw to it that they were in good shape and the next spring, 7 months later, I would come back and there they were. So, it was another example of the resourcefulness of these incredible animals. For them to do that before they were even one year old.

GT: A worried parent. But great students.

CR: To me it was like going to a university and they were my teachers. They were my professors. They taught me about what life was about and more than just about bears. They taught me a lot about how nature worked. Because I was living an incredible life with all these animals, not just the cubs, but there were hundreds of other bears around. Living immersed in this incredible example of nature and then to go back after they denned up to raise money so I could be back the next year, I was immersed there into our world of finance and craziness, that it felt like to me -- this weird world that we lived in outside of nature, because we seem to think that we can live despite nature, and so the juxtaposition of going from one life with these incredible animals to this other life that we live here was really a teacher as well.

GT: Thank you Charlie. This is Louisa Willcox and The Grizzly Beat, and we are talking with grizzly expert, author and filmmaker Charlie Russell. This is the first of two podcasts. Listen next week as Charlie talks about the dangers of tracking poachers from an ultralight plan in Far

East Russia, the death by a bear of our mutual friend Timothy Treadwell, threats to grizzly bears in Alberta and Yellowstone, and the possibility of a more intimate relationship with grizzly bears.