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‘Eight Bears’ and ‘What the Bears Know’ Review: Loved, Feared, Endangered

Around the world, bears are objects of reverence, fascination and deep misunderstanding. Can humans learn to live with them safely?

By Richard Adams Carey

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A bear and cub at a bear observatory in central Romania. PHOTO: DANIEL MIHAILESCU/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Once, on an Alaskan mountain ridge, I led my 10-year-old son on a porcupine chase through a thicket of alders. We broke out on a glacial stream, where a silverback grizzly, a mere 30 yards away, was prospecting for salmon and splashing in our direction. The wind was behind the bear, blowing our scent away. The hair lifted on the back of my neck as we quietly retreated.

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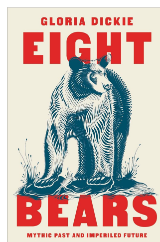
Eight Bears: Mythic Past and Imperiled Future

By Gloria Dickie

W. W. Norton & Company

272 pages



A bear reminds us that a human being can be prey, and as recently as 25,000 years ago, we were so reminded quite frequently. Then many bear species began to go extinct. Those that remain are now provided an engaging group portrait in the journalist Gloria Dickie’s “Eight Bears: Mythic Past and Imperiled Future.”

As species-wide portraits go, this one is stunningly diverse. Consider the gentle panda, which in 1961 was adopted as an environmental icon and the symbol of the World Wildlife Fund. Why a panda? Ms. Dickie quotes George Schaller, the first Western scientist to do field work on the bear, who observed that the panda “has been patterned with such creative flourish, such artistic perfection, that it almost seems to have evolved for this higher purpose.” Such flourish and perfection have also made the panda the most popular of zoo exhibits.

Ms. Dickie deftly describes the panda bear’s journey from zoological obscurity (it was the last of the book’s eight species to be described by Western science) to

international celebrity, the most crucial step being the hard-won success of China's captive-breeding program. We learn that the panda so charms us by virtue of what the neuroscientist Edgar E. Coons calls "hedonic mechanisms"—i.e., physical traits that in combination suggest a human toddler.

Especially as cubs, bears of all eight species—even the dangerous ones—trade to some degree in these mechanisms. The most dangerous of all? The little-known sloth bear, whose shrinking habitat in the Indian subcontinent puts it more and more in people's way, and whose hair-trigger ferocity makes North America's grizzly—a subspecies of *Ursus arctos*, the brown bear—seem, well, panda-like.

"Sloth bear" is a misnomer bestowed, probably, by early European explorers on a scraggily furred ursid that is actually swift and active. The animal would more accurately be called the anteater bear, suggests the author, since it feeds on ants and termites. But this bear itself is stalked by India's tigers and leopards; with claws ill-adapted to climbing trees, the bear perhaps "has no choice," writes Ms. Dickie, "but to explode in a flurry of fat, stumpy teeth and claws when threatened."

Also little known, at least in the West, are the sun bear and the moon bear of Southeast Asia and the southern Pacific. The diminutive sun bear, smaller than many dogs, is one of those rare animals that—like humans—communicates in part through facial mimicry. The more imposing moon bear has been the primary source of the bear bile used for thousands of years in traditional Asian medicine. The bile's active molecule—ursodeoxycholic acid—indeed has medicinal value: "nature's gift to mankind," says the University of Minnesota medical-school researcher Clifford Steer. But the bile's virtues exist to the detriment of both these species: Illicit farming operations have decimated their numbers in the wild.

The tree-dwelling spectacled bear—the inspiration, indirectly, for Michael Bond's Paddington—proved so elusive that Ms. Dickie never managed a sighting during her weeks in Ecuador and Peru. These bears are climbing to higher elevations as a warming climate drives the cloud forests of the Andes farther up the mountainsides. In the Arctic, meanwhile, the polar bear has no farther north to go.

But a resource common to all these species is a supple and far-ranging intelligence. The comparative psychologist Jennifer Vonk has found that American black bears, for example, can grasp symbolic imagery and quantify objects. "In terms of quickness to acquire discrimination and the markers of some of the things we call 'intelligence,' " Ms. Vonk tells the author, "bears have outperformed the great apes I've worked with on many tasks."

That comes as no surprise to the self-taught "bear-whisperer" Steve Searles, whose memoir, "What the Bears Know: How I Found Truth and Magic in America's Most Misunderstood Creatures," is co-authored with the journalist Chris Erskine. As a hunter and wildlife-savvy resident of Mammoth Lakes, Calif., Mr. Searles was hired by the town in the 1980s to rid the mountain-resort community of first

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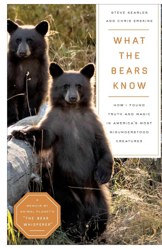
By Steve Searles and Chris Erskine

Pegasus Books

272 pages



its problem coyotes, and then its problem black bears.

This initially involved shooting to kill, something Mr. Searles found emotionally punishing to do with the coyotes and impossible to do with the bears—especially since both the coyotes and the bears had been lured into the town by unsecured waste food, or else by people who actively fed the animals.

Mr. Searles is candid about his own flaws and bad behavior, about the wounds inflicted by an abusive stepfather, about the aimless hedonism that led him from the Orange County of his boyhood to the then-remote village he saw as “a drinking town with a skiing problem.” But in the Sierra Nevada’s solitary, conflict-averse black bears, he finds not only a sense of misfit kinship but an undeniable mission as well. He quotes the novelist John Dos Passos: “People don’t choose their careers; they are engulfed by them.”

Engulfed, Mr. Searles plunged into what a scientist would call field work in and around Mammoth Lakes, learning about the habits, behaviors, den sites and individual personalities of between 40 to 60 resident bears. He learned how bears communicate and how an alpha bear asserts dominance. He assembled what he dubbed a SCAT kit (“special control and aversive tactics”) made up of such items as noisemakers, flash-bang devices, rubber buckshot and rubber slugs. He also carried live ammunition and a shotgun painted orange. This, he found, reassured bystanders who assumed “the colorful shotgun fires Twinkies and lavender farts.”

Mr. Searles knew that his work would involve managing people more than bears. Human beings and black bears can coexist, he maintains, if the humans are responsible with their food and its disposal. Make that *very* responsible, given the animal’s acuity and persistence. “Bears are unexpectedly adept at futzing with pins and clips,” Mr. Searles says, and “far more patient than most humans would be in puzzling out any sort of wires or chains that secure the lids” on refuse containers.

Eventually most Mammoth Lakes residents stopped feeding the bears and even take a sort of civic pride in keeping peace with this minority group. But then there are the tourists, who arrive in ever greater numbers with too many sandwiches and not enough caution.

None of this is easy, and as the town grows and Mr. Searles becomes a reluctant reality-TV star—there is fascinating behind-the-scenes material on what that was like—this uncredentialed bear expert finds himself in the middle of turf wars with police, politicians, scientists, and state and federal wildlife managers. It all makes for a strenuous life, a rollicking memoir and a fulsome sense of gratitude. “I was the luckiest, most blessed person ever,” Mr. Searles concludes. “Millions of us have spiritual voids, unable to voice what is missing from our lives. I am fortunate that my office was the woods, where I could look into the eyes of a buck or a bear on an almost daily basis. As it turns out, that is exactly what I needed.”

For Ms. Dickie as well, all eight of the extant bear species—as inconvenient, frightening and occasionally lethal as they may be—represent something necessary to human ecology and spirituality. Her vivid and engrossing book (which unfortunately lacks an index) is not only a celebration of beardom, it is

also, alas, a warning. Given current trends, she fears only three species will survive to see the end of this century: North Americas's uberadaptable black bears, the widely protected brown bears and, of course, the mechanistically hedonic panda.

"Losing bears would mean we lose a beautiful and complex relationship that has paralleled our own journey in this world," she laments. "We would lose a grandfather, an uncle, a mother, a medicine man, and a teacher. And in some ways, we would lose a part of our own wildness. Without bears, the woods, and our stories, would be empty."

—Mr. Carey's books include "Against the Tide: The Fate of the New England Fisherman" and "The Philosopher Fish: Sturgeon, Caviar, and the Geography of Desire."