

BEAR-OLOGY™

Fascinating Bear Facts, Tales & Trivia

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PREFACE — The Lives of Bears

I am partway up Bear Paw, one of the many ski runs on the north face of Whistler Mountain, when I spot the familiar chocolate hue of Jeanie's fur in a small island of trees. She lies in the cool shade of the firs on this late May evening. The ground is damp from a recent rain and the air is heavy with the scent of pine. It is dusk; there is just enough light to make out the distinct cream patch on her chest.

I know it is Jeanie in an instant, for we have met on this mountain many times before, but this is the first time this year. She is only recently out of her winter den, and I'm excited to see whether she has cubs with her. A branch cracks behind her, and then another. And then a cinnamon cub tumbles Winnie the Pooh-like out of the tree above her head, landing on her back with a squeal. She gently shoves him to the side, only to watch him rear up on his hind legs and leap at her head. He wants to wrestle, and she is happy to oblige.

Over the years, I have spent time in the company of many bears, from the black bears of Whistler to the great browns of Alaska and the winter-white polar bears of Churchill. Jeanie, however, holds a very special place in my heart. She is about 20 years old now and resides with me and 10,000 other human beings in and around Whistler, a four-season resort community nestled in the coastal mountains of British Columbia, Canada. The center of Whistler is the Whistler-Blackcomb Ski Resort, one of the world's premier downhill skiing destinations and the official alpine skiing venue for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The town proper is spread out across and down the valley, a dozen distinct neighborhoods joined by roads and wide ribbons of forest.

Whistler's urban landscape was specifically designed to accommodate the natural environment. The idea was to design the town in

a way that allowed it to blend in with the surrounding forest rather than dominate it. While the goal was laudable, it also created some problems, for this is prime bear habitat. It essentially created a situation in which bears and people were forced to coexist side-by-side throughout the entire community.

Jeanie has been the matriarch of Whistler Mountain since I moved to Whistler in 1996. She has become an icon in our community and a symbol of our attempts to learn how to coexist with bears. Residents follow her life story in the newspaper, and teachers often use Jeanie's story to teach children about bears everywhere. Like Olympic gold medal winner Ross Rebagliati, who also calls Whistler home, she has become something of a local celebrity.

But her life has not been easy. When natural foods run out in the late fall, she sometimes finds herself rummaging through garbage in the middle of Whistler Village. She has been trapped and moved out of busy urban areas and sent back onto the mountain. Biologists have fitted a radio collar around her neck and tracked her movements. Police have fired rubber bullets and bear bangers at her to teach her to stay away from people. She has raised five sets of cubs since I have known her, not one of which has survived long enough to raise cubs of its own. Jake, the little cub that wanted so badly to play wrestle with his mother, was killed by officials when he was three years old for routinely raiding unsecured garbage cans in search of food.

It is for Jeanie and Jake and wild bears everywhere that I have compiled this book. My experiences with Jeanie and dozens of other bears have allowed me to look through a small window into the lives of bears. This book will help to promote a deeper understanding of these intelligent and vulnerable animals, one that transcends the unfounded fears based on years of misinformation, sensationalized media stories, and exaggerated campfire tales. I hope people who read this book, many of whom may never have had the opportunity of living or recreating in bear country, will gain even the smallest semblance of the true nature and essence of the bear—one of the most amazing animals on planet earth.

— *Sylvia Dolson, the Bear Lady of Whistler*