

Grizzly Times Podcast
Episode 49
Transcription
Tom Mangelsen Interview, Part 2
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This is Part 2 of the Grizzly Times interview with Tom Mangelsen, legendary nature photographer and advocate for the wild. This episode focuses on Tom's connection with grizzly bear 399 -- perhaps the most famous grizzly in the world.

Don't miss Part 1 of this interview, where Tom shares reflections on his evolution from hunting and trapping to carrying a camera instead of a gun, and his challenges speaking up for grizzlies and other large carnivores in a notoriously hostile arena.

Louisa Willcox: Tom, maybe we should get to your experience with Grizzly 399, the famous matron grizzly bear of Jackson. It's really through your camera lens that you made 399 a rock star among the many grizzly bears in Yellowstone. And these bears have become kind of an ambassador for a different relationship with grizzlies and all wild animals. Maybe you can talk a little bit about what she means to you, and what you think she means to the people who flock to Grand Teton in hopes of catching a glimpse of her.

Tom Mangelsen: Well, I've been living in the north end of Jackson Hole right on the border of Teton Park for 40 years now. And for the first 25 years, I'd never seen a grizzly bear in Teton Park. They'd been extirpated for 50 years at that time. And basically, other than a few that might wander into the very north edge of Teton Park, they were gone.

There were maybe 250-350 bears in Yellowstone at that time. And so, if I saw a grizzly in Yellowstone, it was a big deal. And I ended up going to Alaska to photograph grizzlies along the coast and/or Denali Park, where there were still interior grizzlies that were fairly common.

So when the first grizzlies showed up here -- one was on my deck actually in the middle of the night. My Labrador was lying by the sliding glass door by my bed and started going crazy barking. And I bolted upright, and I saw a bear staring at the dog -- just face to face through the glass. And I thought: "Oh, it's a black bear." And I've seen black bears down here before -- that was not that uncommon. And then I realized no, it's not a black bear, it's a grizzly. And I thought: "Holy crap." But then I thought: "Well, did I? Was it something imagined, or a dream?" I realized: no, it was real. And so that was in 2005.

And then in 2006 in the late fall, I heard that there was a grizzly bear with triplets, cubs of the year, at the Oxbow Bend. And my sister was here, and I drove up there just to get a glimpse of this anomaly -- the first grizzlies to return to Teton Park. And sure enough, there she was up on the island of the Oxbow Bend with her cubs eating on what looked like a moose carcass. And it was right at dusk and hard to see, so no real photographs or anything. And that was the last we saw her in September/October.

And then the next spring in April, we went up there -- we had heard there was a grizzly bear there with three cubs. And again, it was the same bear with -- now they're yearlings and a bit bigger. And so I went: "That's great, we'll get some pictures of her and document this great return of the grizzly, and that will probably be it -- she'll probably be gone and disappear." But she hung out all spring. She came out in April-May, and was there all summer, and again in the fall, and then disappeared into high country into her den.

And so, the next year she came back out. And it became an annual thing. What was fascinating about her, I think, is that she was considered a roadside bear, which means that she could tolerate people. And she preferred people over the interior backcountry, where large males tend to live and sometimes will harm the cubs or kill the cubs to put females back into estrus -- when females are nursing and have cubs, they are not receptive to being bred. But this way, the male can spread his own genes. It's the same thing that lions do, and tigers do, and a lot of other animals.

So she seems to feel more comfortable around people -- or that's our theory anyways, you would have to ask her. And she only attacked one person, and that was up at the Jackson Lake Lodge just the second year, when her cubs were yearlings. She had killed an elk calf, and they were feasting on it right next to Jackson Lake Lodge. The Park Service knew she was there -- they taped the area off with police tape.

And there was a walker/runner early in the morning. He saw the tape and then he didn't pay much attention to it. And he basically ran right face to face with her and the cubs and the carcass, which is the worst possible scenario. And he backed up and he tripped on a root, or a stone or something, and fell backwards. And that set her in motion. He rolled over, and she bit his shoulder, and one of the cubs sort of decided to join in. About that time a woman on horseback came by and they ran off.

Then an ambulance came. And usually, they would kill the bear that did that, but on the way to the hospital, people said that the man begged them not to kill her, because he was wrong, and she did everything right according to a bear -- you protect your cubs, you protect your food.

And sure enough, the Park Superintendent, Mary Gibson Scott, erred on the side of the bear. She did do the right thing. For the bear, it was a normal behavior, it wasn't aggressive. The bear didn't look at the man as a food source. So fortunately, Scott let the incident go. And that was the only time 399's ever attacked anybody. And I've only ever seen her do little quick bluff charges here and there -- she's not even been aggressive enough to bluff charge people.

So that's a real winning situation, and people have seen her regularly over the years. And this is the 15th year now I've been watching her. She'd be 25 now last January -- she was probably born in January.

Last spring, she came out with quadruplets which is incredibly rare in the bear world. And she's had three sets of triplets, and three sets of twins, and a couple of single cubs, and a couple years she didn't have any. But to have cubs at 24 -- most bears don't live much past 15, let alone have cubs that late in their years -- was a real surprise.

She's an incredibly healthy, an incredibly good mother -- well I think. Oh, I fell in love with her -- I just felt that she was such a good ambassador for other bears and for other wildlife. And she taught people a lot about the bear world, and how important they are, and how special they are because of their behavior and everything about them.

And I saw that first year she would take her cubs to the side of the road. And she has to cross highways all the time to get from a to b, to a different food source. And she would look up and down the road sort of like a city dog, a stray that might live in the city before it crosses the streets of New York. And she knew this, she was that intelligent. Of course, we all know bears are incredibly intelligent, but if you see it and how dedicated she was to her cubs... If one cub got left behind, she'd go back and get it. Sometimes her cub would grab one of the highway cones and play with it like it was a chew toy, and she'd have to go scold it: "Come on, you have to keep going."

But the most rewarding thing was the number of people that were so overjoyed that they saw a grizzly bear, most who had never seen one before. And then she grew and grew and grew. And she became this "rock star," she had her own facebook page. And more and more people saw her and learned about her from all over the world. And I would get messages: "How's 399?" And: "When do you think is she going to come out with cubs this year?"

But as the years passed, more and more people would come just specifically looking for her. And here is a little story from maybe three or four years ago. I had just done the book called Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek with Todd Wilkinson. And 399 and her cubs were just south of Pilgrim Creek, which is where their main territory is. And there were like three big vans of 30 kids from Olathe, Kansas. They were on a tour -- it must have been in the early spring or fall. And the kids got out of the bus. And I hadn't taken my camera because she was so far -- she was sort of a dot with the two cubs.

And this kid came up to me and says: "So you're Tom Mangelsen, aren't you?" and I said: "Yeah." He said: "I have your book, and I was hoping I might see you. Would you sign it?" And I said: "Oh yeah, sure."

So he brought his book from Olathe, Kansas, wherever the hell that is, but hoping to find me. So I got my camera out and we set it up with the long lens, and the kids looked through the camera. And there were a couple of guys with scopes there too. And they were just so happy and excited to see a grizzly bear.

And one of the teachers came up to me, and said: "You know, Tom, this is so great, because we've been to South Dakota, to the Badlands, to Glacier, Yellowstone, and now here. And this is first bear we've seen." And she said: "These kids will remember this day

for the rest of their lives. And a lot of these kids will probably never ever get a chance to see another grizzly bear.”

So I thought: “Wow, that is the value of keeping bears on the landscape, and not having them taken off the endangered species list, not having them hunted, and killed by some idiot. I think that’s important, it really is. To steal that opportunity, which I talked about a little bit before, that may be the only bear that these kids will ever see ---

It’s so important that we foster that and protect not only her, but other bears like her, and wolves and cougars, and teach them the value of these large carnivores, herbivores, predators on the landscape.

Last summer, there were, I think, five million people who came through the park. Everybody was expecting 4 million -- and 3.5 million is normal, average. But because of COVID, a lot of people didn’t travel. And everybody said: “Nobody’s going to go to the park because of COVID.” But everybody thought the same thing, and everybody did come to the park. So there were far more people here this last year than in a normal year.

And there were bear jams -- certainly around the holidays in July and Labor Day, when I think we had maybe somewhere between 800 and 1,000 people watching 399 and her cubs, or 610 and her cubs, or a couple other ones that were offspring of a bear called Blondie. These bears would attract that many people. When everybody was standing on the side of the road, there were bear handlers, Wildlife Brigade people, who tried to keep people and bears from getting too close, which is good.

But it was still kind of mayhem, and it wasn’t the most pleasant way of watching a bear and the wildlife. If I were in Alaska, sometimes I would be the only person there, maybe with a couple friends.

With 800 or 1000 people in a day, you multiple that out from April to October -- well she didn’t go into the den until January 1, and even in December, there were a couple hundred people out there on some days when she was out. But if you multiple all those people together, I don’t know how many hundreds of thousands of people it would be, but it’s in the hundreds of thousands.

And so the next time that they try to -- which they are now -- remove grizzlies from the endangered species list, we will have another several million people likely opposing that move. And hopefully they speak out, and with such an appreciation for the bears and the landscape they will again lose -- “they” being the Game and Fish and US Fish and Wildlife, and Sportsman for Fish and Wildlife, the parks and other agencies. They will lose that battle yet again, I hope.

So, it’s a tradeoff, and many people are being educated, and people have been having incredible enjoyment. It’s so important these days to give people that opportunity, I think, to be outdoors, and for the kids who are maybe not totally absorbed on their iphone or doing something else.

L: You do hope that the kids in the bus from Kansas who were thrilled to see her don't stop their interest with the photograph. You hope they go home and really do their research on how few grizzly bears there are compared to what we had, and how we're down to about 3% of what we had in the lower 48 states when Europeans first arrived. And you hope they learn about how difficult it really is for a grizzly bear to make it in the wild anymore, with all the threats. And you hope that they appreciate the challenges a bear like 399 has living on the combination of national forest lands, private lands, lands in Grand Teton. And even though she's a really successful mother and unflappable around people, about half of her offspring have been killed as a result of all kinds of conflicts. Maybe Tom, you could share a little bit about what makes her cubs so vulnerable?

T: She's a great mother, she's teaching them all the places in her territory, the places where she goes and finds food, whether it be berries in the fall or elk calves in the spring. She teaches them how to navigate around people and where you go to den. And so much of what's learned is dependent on the mother bear. But I think the cubs are -- especially when they're young, just out of the den -- they're clueless, they're helpless basically without their mother. And they could easily be killed by a male bear if they were in the presence of it and if she were not so protective.

I remember one of her cubs wandered off early this last spring, and he was gone for like an hour -- he wandered like a mile. I thought: "Oh what the hell are you thinking?" And all the sudden he realized: "Where's mom?" and then followed the scent track back.

But crossing the highways with mom -- highways in the summertime are insane here with the traffic, and on the main highway going to east out of the park. They spend a lot of time out of the park and there's little protection there.

399 and her cubs once went to these berry patches in August and September for several weeks. And they would cross the highway two or three times a day, going to sleep at night and going to get water in the middle of the day. And there are big trucks, 18 wheelers going 70 miles an hour -- and it's just a freaking nightmare, it's like Russian roulette. Sometimes one cub would come across with mom and two cubs would stay back, and she'd have to go get them. Or they'd run across just willy nilly -- and that was a really frightening deal. And the fact is that they really don't know -- they haven't learned to look both ways before you cross the street like she did.

And then you come to hunting season, which is the next most dangerous time, which starts in September/October -- bow hunting, and then of course rifle season, and the season in the national park itself to reduce the elk herd as they say, which is questionable. But she follows the gut piles and the lost carcasses that hunters don't retrieve. And she will run to the sound of a gun shot like a dinner bell. And she'll come upon a hunter who's gutting an elk. And many people have been killed in conflicts that way, and of course the bear always loses. And it's unfortunate, people have been killed over whose carcass it is -- it's unfortunate for everybody.

There was a hunter up on Blacktail Butte a couple years ago, and he told me he saw 399 at really close range. And he pulled down with his gun and he saw the cubs, and he realized it was 399, and he didn't pull the trigger. But it was so close.

And one of those first three cubs that I mentioned was shot by a deer hunter just outside the park. The bears don't know the park boundary and where the hunting is or not. She was eating this moose that somebody had probably misidentified as an elk or something - - there's no moose season here -- but she was on top of it. And the hunter came along and surprised her. And she stood up, and he shot her in the chest three or four times and killed her. And he was only fined \$500, but under the Endangered Species Act, he could have been fined much much more than that, he could have been put in jail, he could have lost his hunting license for five years -- and I think he did lose it for a few years. But it's a deterrent, the Endangered Species Act is a deterrent to hunters who would just normally shoot at will or because they just want to kill predators.

And fortunately, two years ago Judge Dana Christensen put grizzlies back on the list after they were removed from the endangered species list. The states were going to allow the shooting of 23 bears, one in Idaho and 22 in Wyoming.

As soon as they were taken off the endangered species list, the Fish and Game decided that they would have a hunting season. For years they had said: "Well it doesn't mean we're going to have a hunting season if we take them off the endangered species list." Which is bullshit, because immediately when they were taken off the endangered species list, they were put on a hunting species list. And there was a lottery to hunt 22 bears in Wyoming, one in Idaho, and a couple in Montana, but people rebelled, and Montana Fish and Game decided not to have a hunt.

But 23 bears is a lot of bears. And 399 would be vulnerable because it would be in one of her areas. And again 399 is only special because we know her, and people get to see her. But she's in a way no more special than any bear out there -- they all have a right to live, and they all have their own cubs, and they are as sentient and intelligent and emotional as 399.

So they had this lottery for 22 licenses for Wyoming, and 7,800 people applied, including Jane Goodall and a friend who is an elephant researcher -- we got everybody possible to apply. Because the thing was they would allow one hunter at a time in the field for 10 days to get "his bear." And then if you shot the bear on the first day, then the next guy is up and then he takes five days, and he shoots his bear, and the next guy is up, etc. But theoretically you could have 10 days and not get your bear. And when hunters say "I got my elk," I am like: "What the hell you mean 'your elk'?" But that's the language that hunters use.

So very serendipitously, I drew number 8 out of the 22. And with 7,500, 7,800 applications, getting number 8 was like -- Because I thought they would just throw my application in the trash can, because I'm outspoken about bear hunting. My assistant put

on my facebook page “Oh low and behold, Tom got one of the bear tags -- it was a big surprise, he woke up and found out that he had won one.” And on the facebook post, someone wrote: “Well Tom, I’m coming home -- and all they’re going to do is find your camera and your dead body.”

Well, I’d only won the tag. I didn’t even go hunting yet or anything, because obviously I was going to go hunt with a camera, not a gun, and take up those 10 days. But I was also not going to steal the opportunity of the outfitter. I was going to hire an outfitter and horses and do the whole thing for 10 days, and pay them money, so that nobody’s going to get screwed out of the “outfitters fees” for leading a hunt.

I found two outfitters would take me and were sympathetic -- they didn’t really want kill bears, they liked bears. And one of them said: “Well it would be no big deal to get pictures of bears, because all we do is shoot one elk -- I have a tag obviously -- and then gut it and leave enough of the carcass. And we’ll just wait a day or less, and there will be a bear on it.”

And that’s how they will hunt them -- so there’s no hunt, there’s no sport, there’s no respect. It is as simple as hell to get all the pictures you want. And it would be as simple for the hunters to kill their bears.

Well fortunately, that last day before the season opened, that evening, the judge ruled to put the bears back on the endangered species list, and the hunt was canceled. I was in Nebraska with the opening of “A Life in the Wild” legacy” show -- I have a traveling museum show, and I was doing a lecture to go with the show. And I was talking about 399 to the audience. And I said: “As I speak, the judge is making a decision -- and it’s hard fought.” As you well know, you were totally involved with that, as was Dave, and many many people were fighting to keep them on the endangered species list.

But as I was talking about all that, my nephew all the sudden walks up to the podium. And I said: “What the hell, I’ve got my pants unzipped or something? He’s going to tell me something.” He walks up to the podium, and he hands me a note and it says: “The judge ruled to put the bears back on the endangered species list.”

So a woman next to my nephew had been looking on her iphone keeping track of the decision -- now this is in Omaha – and she elbowed my nephew, she didn’t know it was my nephew. And she just showed him this ruling. And he said: “Well you should go tell Tom.” And she said: You go tell him, no you tell him.” So anyway, he came up. And so I told the audience: “Oh my god, the judge just ruled to put them back on the endangered species list.” And everybody stood up, and it was a standing ovation for the bears -- and in Omaha. So that was pretty cool.

L: Well that was really cool! You and your work with 399 and the photographs you took really were the face of that campaign. I have never seen that many people, over a million, who commented against delisting, and only .999% of people who submitted comments supported it. And the face of that campaign was the bear that you photographed and all

her offspring and the like. I've never seen, in my 30 some years of history with this issue, so many people excited about protecting grizzlies and preventing them from being sport hunted. It was really incredible -- and you deserve that standing ovation.

T: Well, I'm not sure it was for me, I think it was for the bears mostly.

L: It was for the bear, and it was for the effort. I was sitting in that court room that day biting my nails -- and David was so nervous that he refused to go in the court room. And it was completely packed, even the overflow room. I was sitting near a bunch of reporters and nobody could lean back, there was so many people crammed on these benches. And the hearing was done by early afternoon, and within three or four hours, he ruled. It was really high drama, high stakes, because that weekend the hunting season would have started, as you said. I think we were all at the edge of our sanity at that moment.

But the other thing too about that fight was how the science community really came on board. These are animals with incredibly low reproductive rates, and incredibly high human-caused mortality rates. And with state management agencies gunning to reduce the size of the population, we saw a host of characters including your good friend, the renowned scientist Jane Goodall, and scientists from all over the place weighing in on that fight -- and that was really gratifying.

T: Yeah, when I went to D.C. to testify in front of the Natural Resources Committee for the bears, it was interesting to see how many congressional leaders actually were sympathetic. Of course, most of them were Democrats. But that was a pretty special time to see the outpouring of caring for the bears from that group.

And you speak of Jane -- she is a good friend. I've known her for 20 years or so. She did a lecture here at the National Wildlife Art Museum in the year 2002, and I was asked to introduce her -- which terrified me, but I did. And when we got through that, she came in my gallery, and my gallery manager asked if she had ever been to Yellowstone, and she said no. And he said: "Well you should get Tom to take you." And she said: "Well I actually do have Sunday off."

And so, we went and spent a fabulous day, and that's how we became friends. And she's been coming to my cabin in Nebraska to see the cranes every March. So we keep track of each other.

And she knew I was passionate about 399 -- she was disgusted that the bear had a number, not a real name, because she names all her chimps by their personalities and things. And she said she refuses to call it 399, she calls it "No Name Bear."

When I first saw 399, she was five years old and had twins -- and that became big news. Years later, 399's daughter, 610, came out with her first cubs, also twins, and that was a big story. But by that year, 399 hadn't had cubs for two years. Anyway, 610 was the female survivor of 399's first set of triplets -- there were two females and a male in that

first set of triplets. The other female in that set had gotten shot by that deer hunter, and the male of the three was killed by Game and Fish because it killed a cow.

So the local newspaper guy, Cory Hatch, called me up about 610's twins, and said: "That's pretty cool." Cory asked me: "So what would be frosting on the cake?" And I said: "Well, if 399 showed up with cubs this year, because she hasn't for a couple years. And I'm not sure if she had them and lost them, or what."

But anyway, a week later a friend of mine, a ranger up in the park, called me and said: "399 is near the convenience store at Colter Bay." So I raced up there and took a picture of her crossing the road. And then I called Cory and I said: "You know, the frosting is on the cake." I just left that message knowing he would know what that meant.

And so that became even bigger news -- that mom and daughter both have cubs. So there were five cubs running around up there. And AP picked it up and so did a number of newspapers.

Jane saw my picture of the bears in the Sunday Daily in London and called me from London: "You know, your bears are making quite a splash."

Well, we looked up the number of newspapers online and in print that ran that story. And there were 228 publications around the world, including one in Turkey that published that story. In Turkey, can you believe that? So that was the beginning of her fame -- and that was about 8-10 years ago.

And of course, not everybody was that excited about bringing more people to Teton Park. One particular ranger said: "Oh man, there are going to be more people here now." I said: "Yeah, well get over it, because that's what parks are for, and that's what you get paid for."

But every year 399 does something surprising. A year or two after that, 610 adopted one of her three cubs, and so 610 had three and then 399 had two, which is really relatively uncommon. They got together over a carcass or something -- that's probably what happened. It wasn't, as some people said: "Well the old lady just wants give her daughter one of her cubs, she's too tired." That sounds cute, but realistically they were probably on a carcass at night or something. And they wandered off and a cub saw a brown butt going into the willows and followed that one, and then realized it was her aunt, not her mother. And so it was all fine, and 610 raised all three cubs to adulthood. And same with 399: she raised those two cubs to adulthood. So I think that's what keeps me interested.

L: Yeah, there's always something to learn from these animals. And I just want to thank you, Tom, so much for bringing 399 and so many other animals alive for people who otherwise can't get in the wild. And hopefully inspire them to save them, and work with people like you and organizations to give them a better future. Because many people want to see them alive, not gunned down. I just want to thank you for all of your work.

T: Thank you so much -- and ditto to you for all your work. Every time I see 399, I think that somebody might shoot her. I just can't fathom that. I really can't for any bear now, because they are so smart.

And one more little story: 399 wandered south this fall across town, past the Calico Pizza, past the bars, and past the highways, and then the ranches, to Harrison Ford's property. And everybody thought she was out of her mind, that she had got dementia, and that she was starving.

But she did come back. And then she went down there again. I think she was hungry -- she found some more berries down there, and an elk carcass. And she came basically through my yard twice, which was pretty cool -- and ate berries along my neighbor's and my fence. But I think if anybody spent any time with -- whether it be wolves or bears or cougars -- cougars are almost impossible, because they're so secretive. And by the way, I hope people go to cougarfund.org to learn more about the importance of cougars.

But I've learned so much about 399, and still do. She traveled 40 miles in two days before January 1st when she went into the den up above Pilgrim Creek in deep snows. And this was the second latest time she went into the den -- she made the record of January 2nd about five years ago. Because there was so much food, she decided to eat as much food as she could to get through the winter, to put on fat.

But watching her plow through two or three feet of snow with new cubs, it was so incredibly heartwarming. My assistant and I tried to walk about 20 yards in the same snow to get a better angle of her. And we could hardly get 20 yards, because there was crust on top of the snow. And she's 25 years old, and she's snow plowing. And the cubs on the first day, they were just sort of playing grab ass with each other following her, because they were full of themselves, and fat and sassy. But then by the second, they were marching right behind her, with her breaking trail.

And the thought of somebody killing her for fun, or for any reason, is just -- it would break my heart, but it would break so many hearts. And that's what we have to instill in people: they need get out and see these animals, and go wherever they can to learn more, about see how lucky we are to have parks and national monuments and places that keep the wild wild.

Anyway, I thank you for letting me share some of these thoughts, Louisa, and keep up your good work.

L: This has been my treat. And I just want to thank you Tom! Grizzly 399 and so many other wild animals are blessed to have you as an ambassador for them. This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times, here with Tom Mangelsen.