**Grizzly Times Podcast**
**Episode 48**
**Transcription**
**Tom Mangelsen Interview, Part 1**
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Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times, and I am thrilled to have this opportunity to talk to a man I'm honored to call a friend, who's one of the most talented and dedicated photographers of wild animals, and whose devotion to his craft has taken him to remote country on all seven continents. Tom is especially famous for his photography of wildlife in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and for his book, The Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek, co-written Todd Wilkinson, that features a grizzly bear known as 399 -- perhaps the most famous grizzly in the world.

In our own ways and for over four decades, Tom and I have been on a journey towards a more compassionate way of treating our fellow non-human travelers. It's a journey that's been fraught and bruising for many of us -- and the stakes cannot be higher, with the catastrophic extinctions of species caused by human persecution, intolerance and development, now compounded by the threat of climate change. Tom was among the first who led me to think deeply about the institutional problems of state wildlife management, a system that still views carnivores as varmints. I just want to thank you, Tom, for your passion and your commitment to the wild -- and for being here today.

Tom: Thank you, Louisa, it's great to talk with you again after a while. And we have a long history as you mentioned, and a long friendship. And thank you for all you have done for grizzly bears in the wild, and of course your husband Dave, he's done so much too -- and I have a lot of respect for both of you of course, thank you.

L: Well, we're all part of the clan of the bear, I think, and thank you, Tom.

T: You're welcome.

L: Well, maybe you can start by sharing some about your roots along the Platte River, and your journey from being a boy who trapped and hunted to a man who chose a camera to shoot with instead.

T: Yeah, I grew up in Grand Island, Nebraska. My three brothers, both my parents were from there, my grandparents were from there -- and it's not far off the interstate, which a lot of people would recognize only because they pass through going somewhere else, I think. And the Platte River is adjacent to I-80. And when I was a boy, there was no Interstate or big highways -- it was a great place to grow up. And my dad had a cabin on the Platte, mostly a hunting cabin, a one room schoolhouse. And he had hunted there since 1932.

And that's how I grew up, hunting and fishing with him. And my brothers were also pretty avid duck hunters in those days, and they kind of fell away from it over the years. But I was the sort of the black sheep that didn't fit in, I was more interested in being outdoors than my three brothers. But the river had a big influence on me – and of course my dad did, he was pretty crazy about hunting and fishing. And we spent our summers getting ready for the upcoming hunting season, we'd be painting our decoys, and making decoys, and cutting brush for making it better for duck blinds -- and I didn't know any better.

And when hunting season came along, we spent every possible opportunity -- and I had to be out of school, taking off extra days when the snow was flying, and the geese and ducks were flying. And my dad would call the priest at St. Mary's Cathedral High School where I was going to school, and he'd say: "Well ya know, Tom would like to go hunting tomorrow, can we get a dispensation for a couple days to go hunting?" And his bribe was that he would give him ducks and geese after we went hunting, and so I always got out of it.

I never watched football games or did a lot of things on weekends except hunting and fishing, which I was passionate about. But during all those years, I learned a lot about animals, animal behaviors, just watching -- other than ducks and geese, beavers and muskrats and a lot of other animals, other birds of course. But I think it was that love of the river and love of being out more than killing something -- my dad wasn't big on killing. It was about the sport, it was mostly about the sport or the challenge or maybe the game, in a way, of hunting, and fooling ducks or geese, whatever it might be, that drove me in a way to photography in the end.

I trapped for a while. My dad was sort of a classic Midwest person who wished and taught that there were animals that were the "good guys" -- and those would be the pheasants and quail and ducks and geese and cranes. And then there were the "bad guys," which were the raccoons and possums and skunks and foxes and coyotes, who were the egg eaters or the bird eaters. And so he said we should trap some -- we had a lot of raccoons, and he thought we should cull some of them.

And so when I was about 10 or 12 years old, I read up on trapping. And I saw an article in Field and Stream magazine advertising about taxidermy, so I got all this information about trapping and taxidermy. And I started trapping along the river.

And I remember one day, I found a raccoon in one of my traps, and then I realized that the raccoon had obviously chewed his leg off to save himself. And that made me think, I suppose, about what courage and what heart this raccoon had to set himself free. And then about three or four days later, I caught a three-legged raccoon -- a three-footed raccoon -- and realized he had come back again because he was probably hungry. And then I had to shoot him -- I skinned all the animals that I trapped, possums and raccoons and muskrats and stuff, and I sold them to local furrier. But I think that was sort of an eye-opening experience for me, an epiphany, that this poor raccoon had had to chew his leg off, or his foot off.

And I went to my dad and I said: “You know, this is really phenomenal, I don’t understand.” I said: “Maybe I should quit trapping.” I realized it was cruel behavior. And so it was one of the early lessons, I suppose, that I learned that animals are so special and intelligent -- and they just want so hard to live -- and that it’s so easy for us to kill them.

And so I changed a lot of my behavior in those early years. I was still hunting ducks for many years after that, and geese, but the more I learned about hunting, I felt for the birds, and the more I wanted to get away from that. And I started photographing them when I graduated from college, so I hung up the gun and started taking pictures with a camera instead, which was a lot more rewarding. And so that’s what I did.

L: Well, you’ve talked a lot over the years about your view on killing wild animals, especially for recreational hunting opportunities, and how that robs everyone of the thrill and the wonder of being in the presence of the wild. Maybe you can elaborate a bit on this.

T: I think most of what I was concerned about was hunting for trophies -- and things like grizzlies and wolves not so much -- because we ate everything, in a sporting way, as ethically as one might. As far as the bird hunting and the ducks and geese, we didn’t shoot things at too far of a distance, so we’d kill it as cleanly as possible and all that. And there weren’t any grizzlies or cougars left in Nebraska -- there were at one time.

But I was never against hunting for meat, or against people who wanted to put food on their table for the kids and their family -- and I still feel that way. I just became against shooting animals like cougars and grizzlies for “fun” under the name of sport. There’s no sport in shooting either one of those species -- or wolves for that matter. And of course, my lesson about the raccoon made me realize how barbaric trapping is, and how much animals suffer, and how pathetic it is.

And beyond that, not only are you killing an animal, say a grizzly bear, that maybe spent part of its life in the Park, or a wolf spends part of its life in Yellowstone or Teton Park but once it goes out of the Park, it might get shot. And so it never comes back in the Park, but then people come to the parks like Yellowstone and the Tetons who would love to see a grizzly or a wolf. And so one guy who’s bent on trapping grizzlies and wolves and cougar does steal that opportunity for millions of people, with one bullet -- one person, one bullet.

An animal like 399 for instance, which I’ll tell you about later -- five million people came through Teton Park this last year -- and probably 500,000 of those saw a bear or a wolf. And if they were shot or trapped, that would steal that opportunity from that many people, which seems pretty selfish and stupid -- and for somebody who’s ego is driven by killing and hanging something on the wall. And even for the big animals, taking trophies like elk and sheep, bighorn sheep or whatever it might be is sort of questionable. Most of those are all eaten, but.

And you get to Africa -- and people who go there and shoot elephants or leopards or lions, same thing. It's really pathetic. And not to be political, but when I saw Eric and Donald Trump Jr. with a big leopard, a trophy leopard over one shoulder and the tail of the elephant that one of the boys were holding up after he'd shot the elephant, I was just nauseated.

So I just wish people would speak out against trophy hunting and hunting animals "for fun." There's nothing for the species and nothing for humanity and peoples' enjoyment -- it's just beyond my comprehension. But it took a long time for me to come to that conclusion, I suppose, because when I was a kid, I was shooting with my BB gun and air rifles sparrows and other birds. And with my dad, I was shooting ducks and geese and pheasants. But it took me a while to come to all these things.

But it was good for me, because hunting gave me the background to have the patience that I do now for photography, which is no different than the skill and the craft of sort of knowing where to be during what season for getting photographs. It also gave me the knowledge of how important hunting is to some people -- it was to me in those days. And then I sort of evolved -- or I don't know, grew out of it, out of the killing, because I learned too much about the animal themselves, how sentient they are and intelligent, beautiful and their family life and the social beings that they are. So I'm lucky -- and people can't say now, tell me that I'm a tree hugger, or tell me I don't know what the hell I'm doing.

Now the new term is "bark biter," that's a good one. "Tree hugger" to "bark biter," but I'm happy to be called either one if that makes people feel good. Since I grew up hunting, I know all the ins and outs and all the rationale -- and I won the world's goose calling championship a couple times, and the duck calling championship in Nebraska. So obviously I've spent a lot of time hunting, so hunters can't tell me that they pay for all the wildlife for us common folk, or photographers, or tourists to enjoy. That's totally crap. But I've learned a lot over the years and have come to different conclusions.

L: Well, it's impossible to ignore the growing severity of our global extinction crisis -- not only from the behaviors you describe of excessive killing, but excessive consumption and now the massive problem of climate change. Tom, how have you personally been affected by the crisis? And maybe do you see your art as a way of helping to tackle the problems?

T: There's just too many people on Earth -- that's number one -- and that's what the major reason for climate change. And Paul Ehrlich wrote many years ago about the population explosion -- and we don't really talk that much about population anymore, I'm not sure why, but maybe it's not PC. We need to. That's what really drives climate change and change in habitats. And we're just losing habitat -- because there's too many people, and you've got the big places like the Amazon, which is being burned for palm oil or whatever, the trees are cleared, which not only destroys habitat but contributes to pollution and warming of the Earth. And the U.S. is right up there, with the things we do affecting climate -- it's not just countries like Brazil or Africa.

But I was in Antarctica last year in South Georgia Island with the penguins. I saw some glaciers 10 or 15 years ago that were once tide water glaciers, they came down to little beaches -- and they were massive, maybe 20 stories high, 30 stories high and a mile wide. And what was a glacier 10 years ago we were actually floating on last year, because they had melted -- and they were gone. And so those kinds of things are really obvious and in front of me. Then you multiple that by all the glaciers that are melting, and the rise of the oceans, and what's going to happen?

Climate deniers are -- I don't know, I don't think that they're unintelligent -- I think it's more about money obviously and politics. And I just don't know how they could deny there's climate change, when it's so obvious and it's affecting so many species in so many ways -- birds and mammals and, of course, people, people living on islands that get flooded out. A lot of our coastal areas in the United States are going to get flooded out. And we need to do something now.

And I was really glad to see yesterday President Biden introducing some bills to help move to cleaner energy and renewable resources and away from the coal and gas.

L: It's about time, but at least he's showing leadership.

T: Yeah. The last administration obviously didn't, and we went backwards so far the past four years – with the rollback of so many environmental regulations and laws, and the favoritism to oil and gas industries. And it's going to take a while, a long time, to get back just to where we were four years ago, let alone where we should be. I'm hopeful and optimistic that this administration will make some changes -- and rejoining the Paris Climate Accords is a big step, so I'm hopeful for that.

L: One of the things that this administration's not going to be able to get to as directly I think, is the issue that you've been confronting for many decades of state wildlife management. Wildlife management in the country is done largely by states. And particularly in the West, the states are bastions of Manifest Destiny and the related notion that we not only hold dominion over all the world, but that we have the right to kill any animal that inconveniences us. And even though there's a huge shift among most Americans away from this mentality, state institutions still prioritize providing a shrinking minority of hunters with opportunities to kill stuff. And I remember you were one of the first people I knew who confronted Wyoming Game and Fish managers about their treatment of wildlife, especially cougars. Maybe you can talk a little bit about what it's been like for you to navigate this fraught arena?

T: Growing up, I think I was taught to respect state agencies or the police or the cops or the federal game wardens or whoever it might be -- so I did. And then I started questioning a lot of things when I got a little bit older, like in college and high school. And I saw how most of our wildlife management is based on hunting and or fishing, but mostly hunting. The laws are written in favor of hunters, and in favor of killing basically as many animals of a species in a particular area as that area and species can tolerate

before maybe the population retreats or crashes. And that's all in favor of selling as many licenses as possible and pleasing the hunters, for the money that they gain from guiding say hunters, whether it be for elk or deer or cougars or bears or whatever. But the Game and Fish departments are beholden to the hunters who depending on whether they're hunting for the family -- it'd be one thing again for meat on the table -- or for trophies. But who has the right? The animal itself has its own rights of course. The right to kill something is questionable, especially for sport, and the Game and Fish seems to ignore that. My dog's out there barking at a tree squirrel, maybe I need to train him better.

I started Cougar Fund, as you may know, in 1999 after I watched a family of cougars on Miller Butte in the National Elk Refuge for 42 days. And I watched a female cougar that had 3 kittens that were about 8 or 10 weeks old. She would disappear every evening and go hunting. And she might be gone for 24 hours, or 36 hours some days, and she'd come back to her cubs. And I realized during those 42 days, that if she didn't come back, the kittens would've starved to death, because they were totally dependent on her coming back. And unlike wolves that bring food back or coyotes, she's nursing these kittens and they can't leave the den, they can't leave this cave.

And so when there were 36 hours, and one day 48 hours when she didn't return, I thought: "Oh crap, she probably got killed outside the refuge and the park, because there was a hunting season on cougars." And originally there was just a quota for one cougar that they could take in this particular area. And that year there was a quota of two. And it was proposed to raise the quota to six.

So after the cougars left Miller Butte in late March, when the elk started migrating and their food sources were disappearing, and the cougars left the den, I went to the Game and Fish and asked: "What protections do you have to keep kittens from getting orphaned?" And I knew that they were dependent on the mother from anywhere from 12 to 24 months – which was a long period, not like elk or deer or something which might be three, four, five, six months.

And the biologist there, Dave Brittemeyer, he told me -- and he was charged with setting seasons and quotas and stuff: "Well you can see right here," and he showed me a little brochure that said: "You can't shoot cougars with 'cubs at side,'" which meant that you can't shoot a cougar that has cubs that are next to it, I guess. And I looked at it, and I thought: "Well, I'm not a mountain lion biologist, but watching this family for 42 days, she never took the cubs with her except she killed a cow elk right at the top of the den and then one below the den one day -- but other than that, she just traveled alone, and the kids just sat there and waited for her to come back."

So I said: "Well, they can't travel in deep snow in January, February, March. I don't get it. She never took the cubs with her. So how do you rationalize that?" And he looked at me like: "Are you kidding me?" He's like, he's living at Disney World.

Mountain lions are opportunistic hunters: they hide in rocks where an animal might pass by and kill it. You can't have four cubs, three cubs or two cubs gamboling about all

around you if you're going to be an ambush hunter. Plus they can't walk in the snow, plus, plus. So it seems like the Game and Fish guy who is in charge of managing cougars doesn't really know that much about their behavior. It's pretty amazing that that kind of stuff happens. And it happens all the time everywhere, not just here and not just that species.

But that's when the lights went on for me and the bells went off, like: "Holy shit, they don't know." And so I started going to Game and Fish meetings and asking people about why are we killing cougars and leaving cubs to die in the den if they get hunted?

And there were people in one big meeting, 50 people there, and I said: "How many people in this room think it's ok to kill a cougar and leave kittens to starve to death?" And two outfitters stood up and said: "Well it's just collateral damage." It was like, you know, bombing villages in Vietnam or something, you kill a bunch of innocent kids. I thought: "How cruel, and how inhumane, and how incredibly barbaric that was -- and that attitude." And so we started the Cougar Fund to better educate people about the life of cougars on the landscape, and bears and wolves and everything else.

But it was amazing to me when I asked Dan Thompson, the lead carnivore biologist of Wyoming Game and Fish, about this a year or two ago. At a forum at the Jackson Hole Center for the Arts, I asked him: "Why are we killing cougars?" And he said: "Well, it's because we are mandated as the Game and Fish to provide hunting opportunity for our constituents." And I had heard from other people many times that "providing hunting opportunities for constituents" is the key phrase. And I said: "So in other words, you're providing fun for your constituents -- so they're killing cougars for fun, is that right?" And he sort of stuttered for a minute and he said: "Yeah that's basically it." He couldn't get out of it.

And then of course over the years, and talking to you and Dave of course, your husband who knows more about cougars than almost everybody, it became clear there's no rationale to kill cougars except if one is attacking your child, or your horse or your foal or your cat or your dog maybe.

At the Cougar Fund, we thought: "We're not going to be those tree huggers who say 'no more cougar hunting,' we would say: 'OK we'll play along with this, but can you maybe protect the females?'" And they said: "Well we don't shoot females, we shoot mostly males." And you look at the data -- and it's like 48% females were killed that year and 50% male.

And the same way in Colorado -- we went to Colorado and found the same thing. And the head of the Commission in Colorado said: "We don't shoot females in Colorado, and you don't need to come here from Wyoming and tell us what to do." And I said: "Well you actually do shoot females." And I showed him the data -- his own data, which he didn't know. But he's on the commission.

And that's the whole problem with the way our Game and Fish management is set up: it's driven by the hunters, outfitters, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, NRA -- and then down to the governor, who appoints the commissioners who make the final rules that are brought to them by the Game and Fish Department about how many can be hunted and how many can be killed. And the commission are made of, generally, non-biologists, non-scientists, non-researchers. For instance, in Wyoming, I think we had three lawyers, three ranchers and, I think, an insurance agent or something. But it's always been that way. They don't have any environmentalists, they don't have any people speaking from a scientific standpoint on the commission.

And so it's basically a bunch of good old boys who end up making the rules and regulations about our wildlife. And when I'm saying "our wildlife," it belongs to everybody, it does not belong to just the hunters and the outfitters, who make a lot of money on it. So that's our challenge: we really need to come up with a different game management system. And it's very difficult because it's been that way for so many years, and it's engrained.

As conservationists, we've offered to come up with money for them because they're losing license sales yearly, and they're going basically extinct -- they're losing money. But they keep grasping onto the old ways, even though they have people like me or others who say: "Well we can help raise habitat money for you, buying habitat stamps or whatever that might be, but we also want a seat at the table." Well, they're happy to take our money, but not to give us a seat at the table. So that doesn't work, it just works against us.

So it's just a difficult situation, and that's the main problem. And I've been to so many meetings -- they're required by law to have public hearings and things -- but they are so weighted toward hunters. And you're lucky to get out of there alive if you're -- and I'm not again anti hunter, but I think shooting again predators for fun is insane.

L: Yeah, I have to say, I've been truly terrified going to Wyoming Game and Fish commission meetings when wolves come up. As a woman standing up in that venue – it is truly traumatizing. And I think it is as you say, to have an opportunity to get a seat at the table for nonhunters, bird watchers, anybody who has a different ethos from just killing. And that is ultimately the challenge, I think, that we face.

T: Yeah. These western states, even if you had a governor who would be sympathetic towards environmental ethics and things, he would be overridden by the legislature that would then tell the commissioners what to do. It's split politics.

It's all about money and politics, as most things are.

L: Absolutely.