

The Story of Sophie, a collared bear in Kananaskis Country

Sophie and her sister were born in a den in the winter of 1996 under a heavy, deep blanket of snow. Their mother, Nakiska, was a large grizzly with a thick, cozy chestnut-brown coat. Emerging from their den in the last week of April and seeing the lit world for the first time must have alarmed the cubs. The den was the only life they had ever experienced, and their mother was now leading them into a world full of wind, puddles of melting snow, and a great diversity of flora and fauna. Cubs are especially vulnerable to predation in their first year of life, so Sophie and her sister didn't stray far from their mother.

Being a mischievous cub, Sophie would often wrestle and play with her sister. When they weren't playing, they were busy learning about what types of plants were safe to eat and where they could find them.

Sophie and her family were careful to avoid noisy, invasive humans. Their sensitive noses could smell things over a kilometre away. From time to time, groups of hikers would unknowingly pass by the family, sending Sophie and her sibling scampering to find their mother. Towards the end of the summer, the grizzly family began looking for a den, one that was located up in the subalpine where the snow fell steadily to keep the family insulated and warm.

The next spring, the family poked their heads out of their den and upon smelling the wet spring air, groggily emerged to begin their search for food. Finding food in the Rockies can be especially difficult for large mammals because so little of the land is comprised of montane and subalpine - areas where grizzly bears' favourite foods grow. To find enough food, Sophie and her family would have to pass by the edge of the sprawling town of Canmore. On one occasion, the family of grizzly bears passed through the Canmore Nordic Centre and encountered a couple of fast approaching mountain bikers. The cubs rushed for cover, and Nakiska, in defense of her cubs, knocked one biker down and bit him. The biker suffered from minor injuries, and Nakiska became even more wary of humans in her home range.

A few weeks later, Sophie and her family encountered humans again while traveling near Skogan Pass. This time, Sophie's mother bluff charged two hikers, successfully frightening them away. The grizzly family stumbled upon more and more people each year as they were forced to share their home range with 1.4 million people who came to the Evan Thomas Valley to golf, ski, hike, bike and climb.

Soon after these two events, the family came across a strange looking culvert with an irresistible odor. Nakiska entered the strange cylindrical object to investigate, and *SLAM!*, a door locked shut, and she was trapped inside. Abandoned and left to fend for

themselves, Sophie and her sister spent the night near the metal trap. The next day the cubs were tranquilized and collared by researchers. When they awoke, Sophie and her sister could not find their mother anywhere. The cubs separated, going their own ways and trying hard to remember all that their mother taught them.

On her own, Sophie tried to avoid people but often found herself pushed into poor habitat by bigger, wiser grizzly bears. This poor habitat included the Kananaskis Country golf course and the Mt. Kidd R.V. Park. She also frequented the power line near a popular swimming spot called Quarry Lake located on the edge of Canmore. The power line runs adjacent to a hotel, a subdivision, and a recreational area where people regularly walk their dogs. Needless to say, Canmore residents were repeatedly bumping into Sophie.

One August afternoon in 2001, Sophie made an appearance in a busy subdivision, where she crossed three streets sending surprised locals running for their homes and vehicles. To prevent future human encounters and further habituation, Sophie was tranquilized, captured and relocated to a region hundreds of kilometers south of the Evan Thomas Valley in Kananaskis Country. When captured, she weighed 250lbs and was estimated to be 5 years of age.

Epilogue

- After the two encounters with humans, Sophie's mother, Nakiska, was moved to the Calgary Zoo. She was initially considered to be a very 'wild' bear and showed little signs of being habituated. Nakiska was a living reminder that we must practice better bear management and try harder to prevent bears from becoming habituated.
- On September 25, 2001, Nakiska died of infected wounds after fighting with another grizzly bear in the zoo. Clio Smeeton, president of the Cochrane Ecological Institute, stated that integrating animals in a foreign enclosure isn't without its dangers. "I wouldn't say it was bound to happen . . . but you're keeping some very large animals in a very small space."
- During the summer of 2002, Conservation Officers received a report that Sophie had been legally shot on the Eden Valley Indian Reserve, south of Kananaskis Country. She is the seventh grizzly bear known to have been killed on an Indian Reservation in the Central Rockies Ecosystem since 1993.
- Sophie's sister, bear #70 underwent several summers of aversive conditioning around Canmore, AB. In 2004, she was relocated to northern Alberta. Scientists later found her collar, which appeared to have been cut off by humans. Bear #70 has never been found.