



SANCTUARY UNDER THREAT

For millennia, Bear Cave Mountain has supplied life-sustaining water to salmon, bears, and people. But the place known to the Vuntut Gwitchin as “where fish spawn” is being choked by trouble downstream.

By Karen McColl
Photos by Esteban Timpany-Engasser

Stanley, a 24-year-old male, is a regular on the riverbank. Then there’s a younger guy, Noof, and Little Foot—he’s got small paws. Sophie, 16, has taken over as matriarch.

“I met [Sophie’s] mother in 1993,” Phil Timpany says, about a certain Mrs. Tucker. “She had a couple of litters in her life.”

Timpany talks about grizzly bears with a familiarity developed over decades of observation. His home territory: Bear Cave Mountain, where he works as a wildlife-viewing guide some 2,500 km as the rivers wind from the Bering Strait into the Yukon’s Ogilvie Mountains. It’s an isolated sanctum, far from any roads, and as magical as the name implies; a place where rich, oxygenated water flows out of limestone karsts and percolates into the headwaters of the Fishing Branch River, providing the perfect elixir for wildlife.

“You couldn’t ask for a better situation for salmon spawning,” says Timpany. “The groundwater is phenomenal.”

Timpany has one of the best jobs in the world, although most wouldn’t feel comfortable in his shoes, which are often planted within a quick paw’s swipe of majestic and intimidating *Ursus arctos*. But Timpany doesn’t see these 115-plus kg animals as a threat; he knows their personalities and has learned to coexist with them. He lets the grizzlies run the show, a philosophy he calls “giving them full citizenship of their habitat.”

Timpany’s experience around bears is one reason he was chosen by the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation to run Bear Cave Mountain Eco-Adventures in partnership with them. The First Nation, based in Old Crow—a community down the Fishing Branch and Porcupine rivers from Bear Cave Mountain, about 100 km as the crow flies—considers this area sacred and pushed for its protection with the creation of *Ni’iinlii Njik* (Fishing Branch) Territorial Park. While the park allows limited access for bear viewing, the 6,500-square-kilometre area is otherwise undeveloped. But now, forces outside the boundaries are strangling the life out of this unique ecosystem.

Not so long ago, chum salmon clogged the Fishing Branch and its tributaries. The bubbling water stays open late into the fall, making it one of the latest spawning locations in Canada this far north. If there was a Club Med of bear habitat, Bear Cave Mountain was it. Salmon provided the all-you-can-eat buffet, and the cavernous mountain offered five-star winter denning. Bears congregated here by the dozens to stuff themselves, a final hurrah before winter. Timpany says in the ’70s and ’80s, a downstream weir counted salmon in the 300,000–400,000 range. When he started coming here in the ’90s, Timpany identified as many as 53 different grizzlies in a season.



Above: Bear Cave Mountain is part of a karst formation that supplies oxygenated water to the Fishing Branch River year-round. **Above right:** Sixteen-year-old Sophie returns to the river to fish every fall. **Below:** In late fall, "ice bears" draw photographers and naturalists from around the world.



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But already by then, the salmon were dwindling. Timpany, who performed fisheries work in B.C. and Alaska for decades before turning his focus to bear viewing, saw the writing on the wall. By 2020, only about 5,000 chum were counted in the Fishing Branch River, according to the Yukon River Panel, a group representing fishing interests in the U.S. and Canada. Timpany says 2021's return was about half that.

"It's still sinking in," he says. "We have this amazing ecology that has been severely impacted by the absence of salmon."

The bears must have known the situation was dire, as only four bothered making the trip there last fall: Stanley, Noof, Little Paw, and Sophie.

Greg Charlie, a Vuntut Gwitchin citizen, says his First Nation is concerned about the low salmon run.

"How's it going to unfold over the next years? It's scary and our people know that," he says. "The red flags are up."

Ni'iinlii Njik means "where fish spawn" in the Gwich'in language. Charlie grew up on the land outside of Old Crow and remembers hearing the Fishing Branch River referred to as a sanctuary. "If rough times happen in terms of food and all that stuff, our people used to go there ... because it's almost open year-round."

Charlie was co-chair of the group that created the territorial park and is a director of the eco-tourism company Timpany operates. During the consultation for *Ni'iinlii*

Njik, Charlie recalls being told by his community, who rely on salmon as well as caribou for much of their diet, "Do whatever you can in order to get as much of the headwaters of the Porcupine River [protected]. That was our mandate."

Unfortunately, protecting salmon-spawning areas isn't enough to save the species. Conservation is complicated by the fish's long transboundary migration. Salmon that spawn in Yukon waters spend the majority of their lives in the Pacific Ocean. Before returning to deposit their eggs and die in the headwaters where they were born, they must swim thousands of kilometres past communities and fisheries in Alaska. A 2020 report by the Yukon Conservation Society points to overharvest as "the most obvious cause" of the decline of Yukon River chinook salmon (chinook being the preferred species for eating). It's agreed that overfishing of salmon is a problem, but the solution is much more elusive.

During his fishery days, Timpany worked on transboundary salmon committees. He's disheartened with how fisheries have been managed.

"It's an international disgrace," he says. "I'm not surprised [about the decline]. It's just a shame."

Timpany isn't sure what the paucity of salmon means for the future of Bear Cave Mountain. Despite the cost and difficulty of getting there, tours are booked solid for the next several years by naturalists, photographers, and high earners wanting to see bears up close.

Plunked halfway between Old Crow and Dawson City, access to Bear Cave Mountain is via a 2.5-hour helicopter ride, and the daily cost to visit is close to \$1,900 per person. Timpany brings in a maximum of four people at a time and about 32 in a season, which runs from mid-September to early November, during the fall chum run. (Visitor quotas are jointly determined by the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Yukon government.) Timpany's guests stay in rustic cabins and watch bears from designated viewing areas.

One of the draws of Bear Cave Mountain are the "ice bears." In late fall, when the temperature dips, the bears' long, wet hair freezes and clumps with snow. Timpany says photographers from all over want to see these impressive chandelier coats.

But how many bears will show up this year? Timpany says he's been keeping guests up to date on the situation. He'll keep a careful eye on the summer chum run as an indicator of what to expect with the fall run. Many guests cancel when he tells them the bad news, but remarkably, some still want to come. Last year, with only four bears prowling the river all season, one group told Timpany it was one of the "coolest" trips they had been on.

"And they were seeing, like, one bear a day," he says.

As for how the bears will cope with the salmon drought, Timpany thinks they will be OK. Most bears in the Yukon don't have access to salmon; they rely on the late-summer berry harvest as their last chance to fatten up before winter. But Sophie, who has spent every autumn on the Fishing Branch and taught two litters of cubs to fish here, will likely be back. She'll roam the riverbank, hoping for one last fill before heading up the mountain to hibernate in one of its limestone caves. **Y**

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