



- The -
**Bella Coola
GRIZZLY**

*By British Columbia
Conservation Officers
Justyn Bell and
Joel Kline*



In the remote central coast of British Columbia lies the rugged, yet beautiful, Bella Coola Valley with a population of approximately 2,000 people. In recent years the Bella Coola Valley has received the attention of adventurers around the world for its renowned helicopter skiing, but each year when the ski season draws to an end the valley's bear population comes to life.

Since the last full-time CO (Conservation Officer) transferred out of Bella Coola in 2006 the community and valley receives its game warden service from the Cariboo-Chilcotin Zone of the Conservation Officer Service. When a CO response is necessary due to human wildlife conflict, enforcement, or general proactive patrols the responding officers are frequently pulled from Williams Lake, Quesnel, and 100 Mile alike. Bella Coola is a 5.5 hour drive from Williams Lake on a good day with limited amenities along the drive.

The Bella Coola Valley is well known for its very rich grizzly bear habitat. The area is frequented each year

by dozens of grizzly bear. These animals thrive in the rich environment that provides

plenty of deer and fish, which helps to prepare the predators for upcoming winter seasons. However, as predators do, they often come into conflict with residents and tourists. Often these predators are seen raiding garbage cans, smoke-houses, or stealing an angler's catch from the shore. On some rare occasions cattle are even lost to bear causing a financial loss to producers.

In the early morning hours of April 17th, 2015 a grizzly bear killed two 600 lb. steers in a local rancher's pasture below his house. Upon waking up, the rancher looked into his field and saw a bear leaving his field. Two carcasses were on the ground. Using binoculars, the rancher's fears were confirmed. Two steers, the rancher had set aside in the section of the field, were now dead.

Conservation officers Justyn Bell and Joel Kline were contacted and mustered from Williams Lake and Quesnel (respectively). The CO's would arrive later



that evening and make attempts to capture the bear. Before leaving their districts, the officers prepared their snaring kits, provisions, and other equipment. Both headed due west, hoping to arrive before dusk in order to have a chance to set snares around the kills.

The officers arrived in the valley around supper time. They met with the rancher who directed the CO's to the kill sites. To the officer's disappointment, the field was quite saturated with water, which limited the options of snaring in the immediate vicinity of the kill. The scene consisted of the two steers killed within 50 yards of each other. One steer was partially buried with its face mostly licked clean. The second steer was largely untouched. Officers skinned out the cattle to confirm the injuries were consistent with grizzly bear. The CO's began the task of coming up with a quick plan to ensure a trap could be set before dark.

Scouting of the area found the bear had wandered up a skidder trail adjacent to the fields. The officers cut a shoulder off the unburied steer. They then placed the shoulder in the cubby snare, set the snare, and anchored it to a large tree. The remainder of the unburied steer was removed by the rancher. The buried steer remained in the field. The officers hoped this bait would provide an opportunity to catch the bear coming back for a midnight feed.

The snare was finished right around dusk which provided the CO's with a chance to check into the Nusatsum Lodge and grab some dinner before returning to sit in close vicinity to the buried steer.

Not long after dark had settled the CO's returned to the field where the buried steer was located. The officers had hoped to find a suitable, safe location to sit, and shoot the bear off the kill; should it return. Because the officers concentrated all their effort in getting a snare set before dark; with the limited time they had, they quickly determined that the field in question was going to



provide some challenges in getting close enough to safely destroy the bear.

Night vision was deployed and within minutes the bear was seen walking up to the kill site. Officers needed to figure out a way to span the 250 yard gap between the road and the buried steer without spooking the bear. Several attempts were made to approach the bear downwind, but there was no way the officers could get close enough that would allow them to safely shoot at the bear while ensuring their own safety. The CO's backed out of the field and switched to plan B.



Plan B consisted of using the gate the CO's found while snooping around the field to drive the CO truck to a location close enough to shoot the bear. But as mentioned before, the field was very wet. The CO's could only get within 150 yards of the bear, which was too far to see the body of the bear in the spotlights.

Discouraged, the CO's watched as the bear got fed up with the light show and wandered off into the trees. Luckily the bear appeared to be headed in the direction of the snare. Several minutes later the CO's heard cracking and branches breaking which signalled the snare had been successful. Feeling proud, the CO's retreated from the field and drove to the snare.

Unfortunately, as the truck pulled around the corner to the snare, both CO's were baffled to see the snare was still set. The

CO's agreed that their next best chance was to catch a few hours of sleep and try again before dawn.

The next morning at 0500 (a short 5 hour nap) the officers geared up and headed back to the field. To their surprise the night vision showed the bear back on the dead steer in the field. The officers planned to sneak along the fence line and wait for daylight. They could then attempt a longer shot than the previous night. Unfortunately the bear winded them at about 180 yards and headed for the hills.

An inspection of the buried carcass revealed that the bear did not do any feeding on the steer, but spent his time burying it deeper. This was certainly encouraging, because it indicated the bear would likely be back in the evening, rather than sleep all night after gorging itself.

Next stop was the snare, in the daylight it revealed that the bear had ripped off the back of the cubby and stole the bait. Trap savvy bear? This added another level of challenge to this mission.

The task for the day was to get another snare set and scout a better loca-



Trap savvy bear? This added another level of challenge to this mission.

tion to park the truck closer to the kill site. Several hours were spent hauling building material to the trail the bear was primarily using to access the fields. Officers built a trail set snare next to a small creek on the edge of the field. This location was chosen for safety reasons, but one bonus was the CO's could watch it from the truck during the evening.

With dusk setting in, 2 snares set, the CO's positioned the truck within 75 yards of the kill and began their wait for the evening's action.

It wasn't until dark had really set in that the CO's caught a glimpse of the bear walking towards the trail set. Both officers had butterflies in their stomachs with the excitement of watching the bear interact with and hopefully get caught in the snare. But... instead this bear walked up to it, took a long sniff, and then jumped back in disgust! Crap! The bear was just too trap savvy. There was no way to know, at the time, if the bear had been previously caught and relocated or if it was just particularly sensitive to man-made features in its area of comfort.

The officers waited and watched for an hour as the bear travelled back and

forth along the creek. It kept looking for a different point to cross the fence into the field. Finally it returned to the location of the snare, and carefully stepped around it.

The bear managed to get through the fence in the same spot it had been using several day's prior. Instead of following its normal path in the field; it took a wide berth upstream of the creek and went around the field.

Now the bear was approximately 50 yards in front of the CO's truck. Both CO's were ready with their .30-06 rifles

pointing at the silhouette in the dark. The spotlight came on and the bear started to turn away. One of the officers was able to get a shot into the shoulder which knocked it over. Three more shots followed and finally the predator was dead.

The CO's were surprised with the actual size of the bear since the night vision skewed the size. Measurements were taken to reveal the mature boar stretched out to 8.5 feet tall. It had 7 inch wide front pads.

There was a 7 cm spread between the upper canines. Simply put, this bear was very large. Killing the two 600 lb. steers had not been an issue for this large grizzly.

The CO's returned in the morning to update the rancher of the success and to remove the traps. The bear was skinned and donated to the Nuxalk Band in Bella Coola to use for ceremonial purposes.

With no other urgent matters to deal with in the valley, the CO's pointed their truck east, and began their long journey home. Both CO's knew this would not be the last time they would be summoned to Bella Coola. 🐾

