The Biggest of the Big—The Brown Bears of Alaska and Russia's Far East

April 30, 2012

If you can get past the concept that all grizzlies are brown bears, but not all brown bears are grizzlies—a source of great confusion to some—there is an opportunity to learn about the most wide-ranging species of bear in the world, and one of the most wide-ranging mammals on Earth.



KODIAK BROWN BEAR (NAT GEO ARCHIVES)

Although "grizzly bear" is used interchangeably with "brown bear" up here in Alaska, "grizzly bear" really refers to any brown bear found in interior North America. Bears found within interior regions of Alaska and Canada as well as remnant interior populations in the western portion of the contiguous US are grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*).

There are only about 1200 grizzly bears found in the lower 48. They primarily exist in designated Recovery Zones in Montana, Wyoming, Washington, and Idaho. Bears of other interior regions and sometime even coastal zones in Eurasia may be referred to as grizzlies, to add to the confusion.

In contrast, there are approximately 32,000 brown bears living in Alaska. Some of Alaska's islands like Admiralty Island in the Southeast part of the state and the Kodiak Archipelago off the southern coast of mainland Alaska are home to some of the densest populations of brown bears in the world.

Kodiak is home to about 3400 brown bears of a particularly large subspecies. The the Kodiak brown bear (*Ursus arctos middendorffi*) is often touted as the largest terrestrial carnivore on the planet. Because of access to an abundance of fish Alaska's coastal brown bears, similar to the Kodiak, can attain weights upwards of 1400 pounds.

Here at the **Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center**, we currently have Alaska coastal bears, a grizzly, and Kodiak brown bears, as well as two American black bears. Most of these are permanent residents at the facility.

Just across the Bering Strait from Alaska lives another gigantic brown bear–the **Kamchatka brown bear** (*Ursus arctos beringianus*) or the **Far Eastern brown bear**. Considered to be the ancestor of the Kodiak, the Kamchatka brown bears are dark brown and the largest carnivorans in Eurasia. These are the bears that were featured in the PBS special ***Walking with Giants: The Grizzlies of Siberia***. The film documents the work of Charlie Russel and Maureen Ebbs–two naturalists who sought to discover some insight into the lives of the bears of the famed Kamchatka Peninsula of Siberia.



KAMCHATKA BROWN BEAR FEEDING ON PACIFIC SALMON (NAT GEO ARCHIVES)

The **black grizzly** or **Ussuri brown bear** (*Ursus arctos lasiotus*) is another big bear occasionally attaining a size greater than the Kamchatka brown bear. These bears are found in the Amur and Ussuri River regions of the Russian Far East, northeastern China, the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

In the Amur region these bears cross paths with Siberian (Amur) tigers on rare occasions, primarily because there are so few Siberian tigers left in the world. Tiger attacks on bears have been reported when the bears were in hibernaculum as well while ambulatory. Supposedly, the brown bears are attacked with more frequency than the smaller Asiatic black bears because of habitat preference and an inability to climb trees. But these bears also attack the typically smaller tigers on occasion. The bears are more commonly known to track tigers, following the big cats' foot prints to ungulate kills, where they ultimately force the cat off the carcass, taking possession of it.

"Huang Di" which translates in Chinese to "King" is the name of the celebrity Ussuri brown bear (Manchurian brown bear) who calls the **San Diego Zoo** his home. Nicknamed "Blackie," Huang Di is one of the largest and most beautiful bears I have ever seen. The black bear is a gentle giant, standing nearly 5 ft at the shoulders and weighing in at nearly 900 lbs. Today his enclosure sits adjacent to two young brother grizzlies. When I last visited Huang Di who was born at the Bejing Zoo in 1984 he lumbered over toward the large metal divider, that when closed, safely separated the younger bears from the big Ussuri brown bear in the adjacent bear grotto. Smell or sound of this gigantic boar in their proximity sent them scrambling to a distant hiding place on the other side of their enclosure. Click **here** for a photo of Huang Di (A.K.A. Blackie).

Jordan is an ex officio council member of the International Association for Bear Research & Management and member of the Coordinating Committee for the Bear Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (World Conservation Union).

In Human Journey

Tags Jordan Carlton Schaul



MEET THE AUTHOR

With training in wildlife ecology, conservation medicine and comparative psychology, Dr. Schaul's contributions to Nat Geo Voices have covered a range of environmental and social topics. He draws particular attention to the plight of imperiled species highlighting issues at the juncture or nexus of sorta situ wildlife conservation and applied animal welfare. Sorta situ conservation practices are comprised of scientific management and stewardship of animal populations ex situ (in captivity / 'in human care') and in situ (free-ranging / 'in nature'). He also has a background in behavior management and training of companion animals and captive wildlife, as well as conservation marketing and digital publicity. Jordan has shared interviews with colleagues and public figures, as well as editorial news content. In addition, he has posted narratives describing his own work, which include the following examples: • Restoration of wood bison to the Interior of Alaska while (While Animal Curator at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and courtesy professor at the University of Alaska) • Rehabilitation of orphaned sloth bears exploited for tourists in South Asia (While executive consultant 'in-residence' at the Agra Bear Rescue Center managed by Wildlife SOS) • Censusing small wild cat (e.g. ocelot and margay) populations in the montane cloud forests of Costa Rica for popular publications with 'The Cat Whisperer' Mieshelle Nagelschneider • Evaluating the impact of ecotourism on marine mammal population stability and welfare off the coast of Mexico's Sea of Cortez (With Boston University's marine science program) Jordan was a director on boards of non-profit wildlife conservation organizations serving nations in Africa, North and South America and Southeast Asia. He is also a consultant to a human-wildlife conflict mitigation organization in the Pacific Northwest. Following animal curatorships in Alaska and California, he served as a charter board member of a zoo advocacy and outreach organization and later as its executive director. Jordan was a member of the Communication and Education Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (CEC-IUCN) and the Bear Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (BSG-SSC-IUCN). He has served on the advisory council of the National Wildlife Humane Society and in service to the Bear Taxon Advisory Group of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA Bear TAG). In addition he was an ex officio member of council of the International Association for Bear Research and Management. Contact Email: jordan@jordanschaul.com http://www.facebook.com/jordan.schaul https://www.linkedin.com/in/jordanschaul/ www.jordanschaul.com www.bicoastalreputationmanagement.com

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