Oldest-Known Wild Bear in the World Dies in Minnesota at Almost 40 Years of Age

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BLACK BEAR AND CUB (NAT GEO ARCHIVES)

The world's oldest-known wild bear has died of natural causes in the Chippewa National forest near Marcell, which is about 28 miles north of Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

Black bears range through much of the northeastern part of the state, which is comprised of mostly coniferous forest.

The radio-collared female American black bear was known as *Bear Number 56* to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) wildlife research biologists. The sow apparently died of natural causes according to my colleague Karen Noyce, a prominent career research scientist with the DNR and a distinguished bear biologist. Bear Number 56 was 39.5 years old when she expired.

With access to world-class veterinary care, regular dental cleaning, a year round and healthy diet, compatible playmates and the compassion of human caregivers, it is not uncommon for a bear—born, and raised or otherwise cared for in captivity—to live forty years or more. But the wild can be an unforgiving place. The average longevity of a wild American black bear is just a fourth of the age attained by Bear Number 56. It is not so common for a wild bear to die of old age.

There are estimated to be about 600,000 individual American black bears in North America, approximately half of which are found in the United States. Minnesota is home to about 30,000 black bears, the only species of bear found in the state. About 3,000 of these black bears are harvested annually; the average age of those hunted is 4 years.

Prior to this record lifespan for a wild bear, a wild brown bear (grizzly) from Alaska had been reported to have lived 34 years.

According to Noyce, Bear Number 56 was last handled in 2010 and presented with a healthy weight. Not surprising, her teeth were very worn, which incidentally is the best indicator of age for a captured wild bear.

Bear Number 56 was observed foraging in recent years, but had sensory deficits, presumably due to her advanced age. Deteriorating vision and hearing may have compromised her ability to get around very easily as suggested by Noyce.

The legendary bear, initially radio-collared at the age of seven, managed to outlive 360 other collared bears in the DNR's long term study of black bear ecology, which was launched back in 1981. From 1981 to 1995 Bear Number 56 reared 22 cubs in the 8 litters she produced. Twenty-one of these cubs survived to 18 months of age, which is about when black bears leave their mothers.

Most adult bears do not reach this advanced age because of anthropogenic factors. Bear Number 56 managed to luck out and is the first bear in the telemetry study to have died of old age. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources also requested that hunters refrain from harvesting any radio-collared bears and this may have contributed to her long lifespan.

The ecologists studying bears comprise a relatively small community of field scientists. There are only 8 species of bears on Earth and most people tracking bears to study their behavior and movement to help conserve them know each other. Hence, Noyce and her colleagues were able to determine that Bear Number 56 was the oldest bear of any bear species in the world that had been studied and for which an age could be specified.

Bear 56 was thought of fondly by DNR staff who got to know her. She died in the wild as a wild bear should.

Note: Bear biologists will convene in Provo, Utah this month for the 22nd International Conference on Bear Research and Management

Update 9/3/13: Itasca Community Television presentation on *Bear Number 56*

In Changing Planet

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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