



David Bittner:

Bear witness

By Carina Scheuringer

In her thick coat of fur, she stands upright, observing her young toying around the creek catching salmon. Her eyes are aligned along the frontal plane; her feet extend into five perfect toes. As she reaches out for berries with her thumbless paws, the relative resemblance to humans is uncanny.

Maybe it is because of this likeness that bears have been a source of human fascination since the dawn of time, fuelling myths and legends from Asia to America. Over centuries, we have admired and feared these remarkable carnivores; we have celebrated, abused and hunted them to extinction. Yet, only a few of us have ever had the privilege to glimpse into their lives and gain a true understanding of their behaviour.

In a roadside café in Aarau, I meet just one of these adventurers. In the past decade, 35-year-old David Bittner has forged unprecedented close relationships with these formidable creatures in far away Alaska. Over coffee, I discover his tale of "chance and experiences" and learn how a biologist who was fascinated by fish came to be 'a man who lives with bears'.

Second nature

At the heart of Bittner's story lies a deep love for nature, which the native Bernese attributes to his upbringing in the Saanenland countryside. "I have to pay a big compliment

to my parents," he says gently. "They brought me in touch with nature." Young David's daily walk to school led along a farmer's trail through fields, past cattle and into a forest. There, he spotted his very first trout in a tiny creek. It was the start of a life-long passion for fish. As the youngster roamed the Swiss mountains during family holidays – camping in "forbidden places" – fishing became his "first self-made hobby."

Over time, this hobby took the scientist deep into the field of biology. In 2009, Bittner submitted his PhD on the evolution of different whitefish species in Swiss lakes to the University of Berne. He was hailed with the 2010 *Bernese Environmental Research Award* for his groundbreaking research.

Going wild

Paired with Bittner's fascination with fish was the dream of an expedition to the 'last wild frontier' – Alaska, where creeks were said to be teeming with salmon. "I had watched all the documentaries and this abundance of fish was just something I had to see with my own eyes," he muses. "Especially after coming from a place where you could spend hours looking and not see a single fish!"

The biologist's research identified Kodiak Island off the south coast of Alaska as an area with particularly high fish activity and so Bittner started to put together a plan to

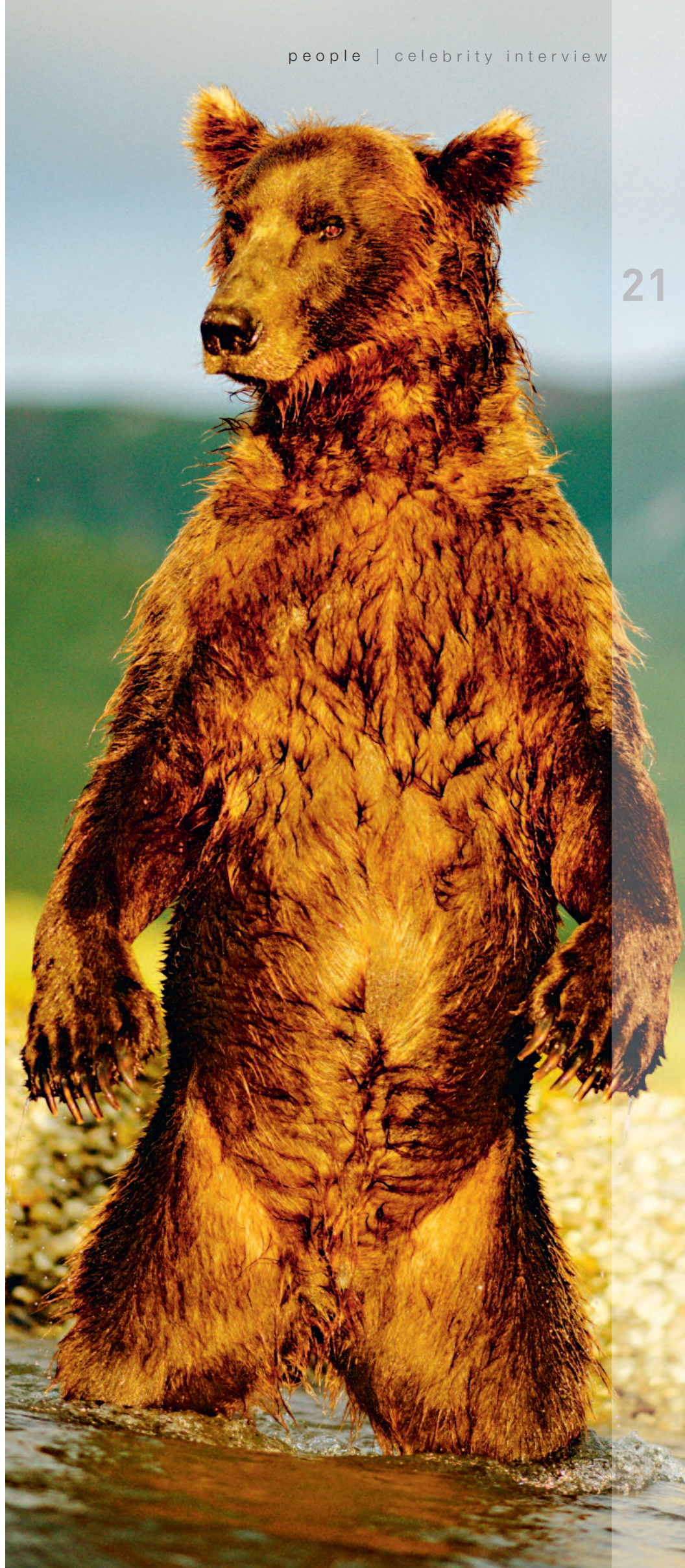


realise his childhood dream. Being an adventurer by nature, his trip was going to take him and his raft far off the beaten track and deep into the heart of bear country. “I knew there would be bears and the idea of meeting one scared me,” he remembers. While his worried mother urged him not to go, there was no deterring the young adult – and so a then 25-year-old Bittner embarked on his first Alaskan expedition in 2002. He had a raft, food supplies and maps in tow – and was banking on his strategy “to simply stay away from the bears and camp in areas with no bear activity.”

Crossing a bear

However, due to the high density of bears on the island – one per every square kilometre on average – it did not take long until the biologist came face-to-face with a carnivore giant. And on Kodiak Island, these wild animals come extra large, weighing up to 1,800 pounds and standing over 10 feet tall. Bittner knew right away that he was in trouble.

“I had done something really stupid,” he confesses. “It had been a tough day. I had dragged my raft through shallow waters and was exhausted. Eventually, the water got deeper and I could finally climb onboard again and drift down the river. I let my guard down and relaxed. Suddenly, as I came around a sharp bend, I found myself right between a mother bear and her cubs. And you never surprise a bear – let alone in a situation like this.”





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"I jumped off the raft into the knee-deep water – and as I walked backwards out of the creek, I fell over. Lying on the ground, I instinctively protected my head. The mother bear came up to me and started roaring, but instead of attacking me, she suddenly turned around and vanished," he remembers. The encounter was short, but its impact was immense. Bittner admits that he would probably have aborted his mission, had he had the choice. However, his bush pilot was not due to collect him for another six weeks. He had to get on with it and learn from his experience.

Amongst bears

The days that immediately followed the incident were particularly testing. The biologist spent his first night curled up in a ball, mentally and physically utterly drained. He yelled, he cried and he went quiet, thinking hard. Even as the initial shock wore off, Bittner was by no means strong enough to continue on his journey. "It was the first time that I found myself staying in one place for an extended period of time. Up until then, I was a typical explorer – always on the go," he recalls. "By chance, I had ended up in a beautiful little spot – near a creek and a little waterfall." From a safe distance, he watched the bear activity around him – and his observations left him intrigued by the behaviour of these wild creatures.

"I started to recognise the same individuals returning to the creek day after day," he says. He knew that this was due to the small home ranges of Kodiak bears, which typically only cover an average of 20 square kilometres (compared to the 1,500 square kilometres of their Scandinavian relatives) and often share fishing grounds. The bears' routines and peaceful interactions were an eye-opener for Bittner. "I suddenly realised that the encounter with the mother bear had been entirely my fault. She had every reason to harm me, but she didn't. In fact, she hadn't at all reacted the way I had expected," he explains with noticeable excitement in his voice. "And I wanted to know more."

Slowly, Bittner started to develop "a level of trust" towards the carnivores in his creek. And so began a new love-story, which has seen the Bernese return to the same spots in the Alaskan wilderness every summer for the past ten years to study 'his' bears – and contribute to bear awareness.

Best behaviour

"It is not so much about the bear as an animal for me, but about the relationships I have forged with certain individuals," stresses the adventurer, whose total time spent in Alaska is now knocking on 24 months. "I am



convinced that these individuals recognise me, just as I recognise them – and to see them again every year is a very emotional experience. Especially when I find a young female bear returning with a cub or a previously injured bear returning in full health.”

‘His’ special bears – Lunnie, Luna, Balu and Bruno – seem to have accepted Bittner’s presence and no longer appear to perceive him as a threat. Footage of the young biologist standing just metres away from a grown adult has travelled around the world in two movies, an *Animal Planet* documentary and a book, yet the adventurer is never lured into a false sense of security. “You have to have the utmost respect and abide by the rules,” he urges. “You mustn’t ever surprise or approach a bear, but always make yourself known. If a bear reacts surprised, be calm and predictable. Retreat to show that you represent no danger.”

While in most circumstances this is enough to prevent or manage a potentially dangerous situation, Bittner knows from experience that different situations may require different responses. “Facing a young overexcited male one day, I realised that retreating isn’t always the right strategy!” he chuckles. “The further back I went, the more the bear closed the gap. I knew I had to act before he came too close and so I instinctively stood my ground. I displayed my readiness to

‘fight’ by yelling and throwing a rock at the youngster. And I looked him right in the eye. Eventually, he got scared and ran off!” On other occasions, the Bernese has found himself ‘used’ as a ‘human shield’ by mother bears trying to protect their cubs from an attack by a dominant male. “Suddenly, I found myself in between the mother and her cub once again, but this time it was different, because the mother had created this situation on purpose. She knew the big males keep would keep their distance away from me.”

Despite all this knowledge and experience, Bittner admits to still being scared in the face of a potential attack. “Every time I come eye-to-eye with an unknown bear, my heart still races and the adrenalin kicks in. Similarly, when I lie in my little sleeping bag at night in my tent and I hear a bear sniffing around the electric fence protecting my camp, I experience a moment of panic, because I need to decide on the appropriate reaction. Do I make a sound and risk that I startle the bear? Or do I not make a sound and risk that he comes too close?” In situations like these, the biologist has no option but to rely on his instincts – and so far, they have served him well.

Meanwhile, Bittner spares no effort to make his camp as unattractive to bears as possible. “I leave the area immaculately clean – you wouldn’t even find a grain of rice.



I use bear-proof containers and sealer-bags to limit smells – and put them as far away from my sleeping quarters as possible,” he explains.

Life less ordinary

Life off the beaten track sees Bittner share food resources with his neighbourly giants as he survives mainly on fresh fish and berries, putting into practice the skills he learnt in the Swiss mountains as a young boy. “It is a life that puts into perspective the luxury that we live in nowadays,” he reveals. He prides himself on leaving no lasting mark on the vegetation of his campsites. “I am happy when I return the following year and it looks like nobody has ever been there before.”

While it takes the scientist less and less time to re-adjust when he returns to civilisation at the end of each summer, he is still fascinated by how his senses adapt to the wilderness. “In Switzerland, I am told that my hearing is terrible and I find myself having to turn up the volume on the television to understand what people are saying – but when I am in the wilderness of Alaska, I can hear a bear rustling leaves 200 metres away,” he claims excitedly. He describes his first time at a supermarket after months of isolation as simply “overwhelming.” “It takes me a moment to take it all in,” he reveals.

Fair share

As much as Bittner is a true adventurer and would never choose to go on an organised group tour, he is by no means “a lone wolf who needs to be by himself.” Indeed, in the past ten years, the Bernese has shared his Alaskan experience with family and friends on numerous occasions – and since 2010, has even been involved in taking tourists to Katmai National Park with a view to raising awareness and generating funds for bear protection.

One of his biggest dreams is to one day introduce his now 18-month-old daughter to ‘his’ special bears – “if she is interested, of course,” he is quick to add. On a professional level, he hopes to one day raise enough funds to combine genetic studies with real-life observations to gain an even deeper insight into the lives and behaviour of Kodiak and coastal brown bears. But for now, his possibilities are limited.

As he is maintaining a full-time job and is a dedicated family man, Bittner can only spend a maximum of two months on Kodiak Island at any given time at the moment – luckily for him, his ‘real-life’ job allows him to live out another passion on a daily basis: working with fish at the Fish and Game Department of Canton Aargau. If that’s not having your cake and eating it...

About David Bittner

- Born in Bern in 1977
- Went to Alaska in search of salmon in 2002 and found his love for bears
- He has starred in a documentary for the American television channel *Animal Planet* (also aired in the United Kingdom) and has worked on two movies *Amongst bears – Living with wild grizzlies in Alaska* and *David Bittner and Amongst bears – Eye to eye with wild grizzlies*
- He has published one book entitled *Der Bär – Zwischen Wildnis und Kulturlandschaft*, and is currently trying to raise funds for a picture book on his ‘special’ bears
- Bittner regularly holds presentations and is a passionate speaker

www.davidbittner.ch

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David Bittner, Swiss biologist



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