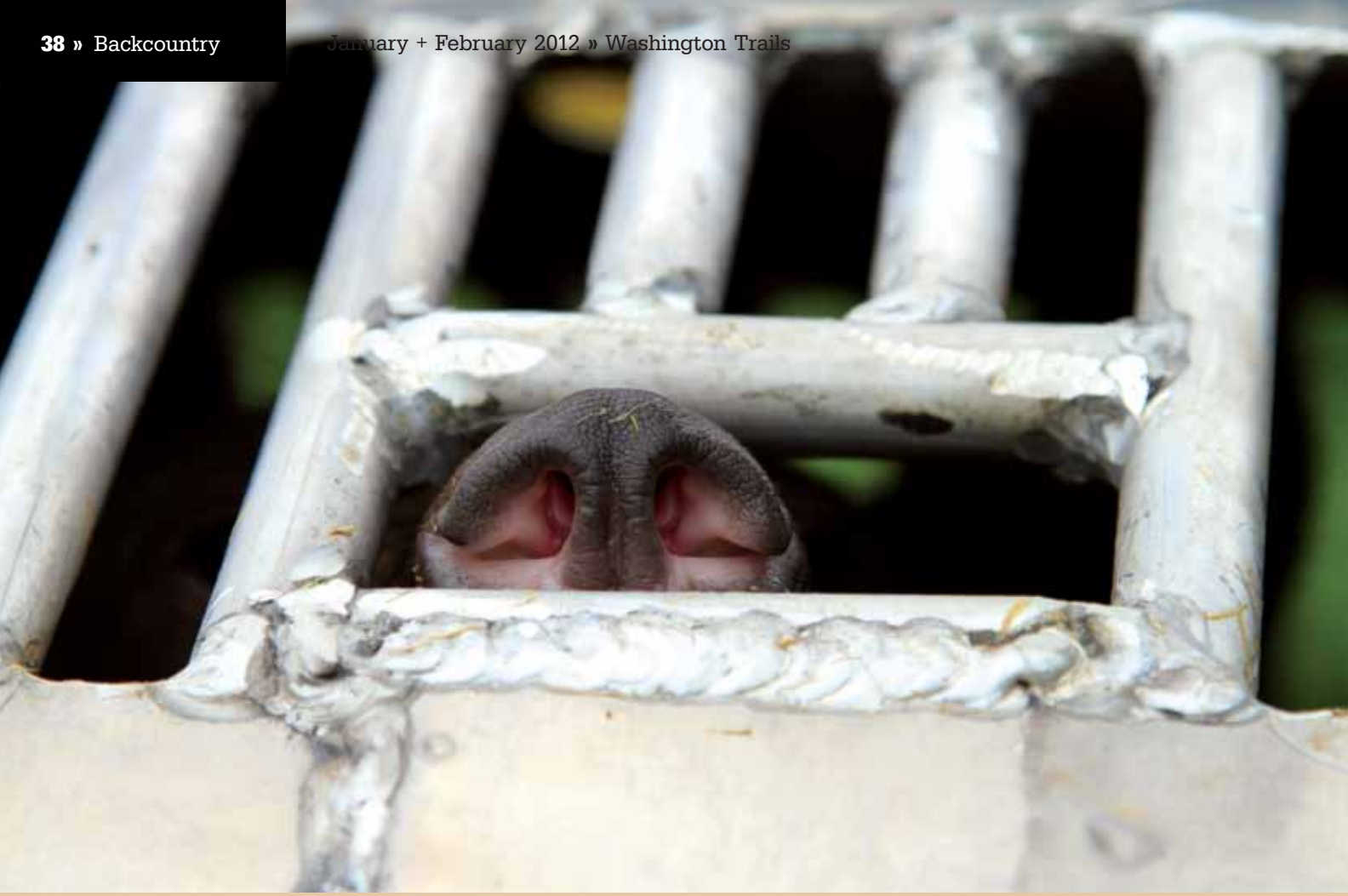


Bear in Mind

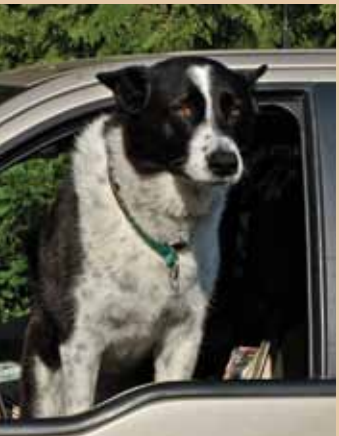
Managing Wildlife in Washington State

Story and photos by Tami Asars

Top: A black bear peeks its nose out of a bear trap

Bottom: Mishka, the Karelian Bear Dog

Opposite: A large black bear roams its native habitat—in North Bend



As an avid backpacker, I've always been drawn to wildlife. Okay, I confess, obsessed is perhaps a more fitting word. Seeing a bear munching trailside as I hike makes my day. So naturally, the first time I had the opportunity to meet Fish and Wildlife Officer Bruce Richards and his service dog, Mishka, I was thrilled.

Before me stood a somewhat reserved, gruff man brandishing a badge with a sarcastic, yet polite, demeanor. He was kind, yet there was a twinkle of spirited mischief in his eyes not unlike the creatures he works to protect. Connected to him was an affectionate Karelian Bear Dog wearing a Department of Fish and Wildlife vest. The setting was an event to promote our respective outdoor programs.

Officer Richards, Mishka, and other members of the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WSDFW) team were front and center with a large bear cage, cougar pelts and educational literature aimed at helping homeowners and recreationists peacefully cohabitate with the great beasts of the forest. I watched as small children gingerly tiptoed around the corner of the big cage, half expecting to see a snarling black bear inside.

WSDFW wildlife biologist and leading cougar researcher Dr. Brian Kertson was busy explaining animal behavior to eager faces as they touched cougar paws and tails for the first time. That introduction was the first of many opportunities I would have to learn about the focused dedication of Officer Richards, Dr. Kertson and other agency officials. Managing wildlife in Washington state is a challenging, complex job, and each official fills their respective roles because of their long-standing passion for keeping wildlife populations healthy.

Keeping wildlife wild has been an evolving process in light of our state's ever growing

population. Years ago, with no other alternative in sight, habituated bears were often euthanized as a means of public safety. But killing a bear simply because it wandered into a crime of opportunity with a curbside trash can or backyard bird feeder was far from the best solution. Just five years ago, a much better method of rehabilitation, the "hard-release," was introduced and has had a very high success rate.

It all starts with a bear who, in a search for food, follows its highly sensitive nose into an urban or rural neighborhood. Garbage cans left out by homeowners the night before pickup day become easy pickings, and bears learn to surf the sidewalks for dinner. Bird feeders on decks become protein sources where bears learn to shop for appetizers in back yards. When a bear becomes a repeat offender and is posing a hazard, it's Officer Richards, Mishka and others on the team to the rescue!

The bear is humanely baited into a large cage that locks the bear securely inside. Next, the bear is tranquilized, measured, ear-tagged and checked for overall health by a biologist. At this point in the rehabilitation, children and adults who are in the neighborhood are often invited to assist the biologist with tasks, or to touch the sleeping bear's coarse fur. As the bear awakens it is transported to a more "bear-friendly" location, such as a greenbelt, watershed or mountaintop and receives the scare of a lifetime—otherwise known as a "hard-release."

At the scene of the release, everything is orchestrated as a finely choreographed dance with the Karelian Bear Dogs' deep barks creating the resounding background music. Before the bear is released, the dogs are taken to the trap and encouraged by their handlers to "get that bear." The encouragement is to help the dogs recognize the bear's scent, if it needs to be located post-release. Officers then stand back with loaded nonlethal beanbag rounds in their shotguns—a measure intended to give the bear a sting to remember.

During the commotion, onlookers are encouraged to shout, clap and holler as if the bear were invading a campsite, so that human voices also become synonymous with fear. When the trap is opened, the bear usually moves at lightning speed as it sees the opportunity for the safety of the forest. And just like that, it's over.

Despite its being in the best interest of the bear, it always tugs a little at the heartstrings. It's one of the only ways humans can communicate these important lessons and protect bears from certain death. Through this program, roughly 80 percent of problem bears have been successfully rehabilitated. Much of the success of the process can be attributed to

Bear Country Suggestions:

Living near bears

- Take trash out the morning of garbage day, instead of the night before
- Avoid using bird feeders, except in winter
- Clean outdoor grills after each use, including any grease drippings

Hiking near bears

- Make noise by singing or clapping your hands while in bear country
- Hike in groups during daylight hours to avoid attracting things that go bump in the night—including bears
- Watch for bear signs, such as tracks, piles of scat laden with berries and small trees scratched to bits by hungry bears looking for grubs

Bear encounters

Although aggressive behavior is very rare, a bear will defend its young or food source if it feels threatened. Startling a bear can also lead to distress and agitation. Most times bears prefer to avoid confrontation and will flee, but when they are agitated, you'll be able to read the signals clearly. They wear their emotions on their big, furry sleeves, and you'll see signs of distress such as jaw popping with head turning, huffing or vocalizing, or aggressive slamming of their paws to the ground. If a bear behaves this way, it's trying to tell you that you've crossed the line. In this case

- Do not look the bear in the eye; this is perceived as a challenge and a sign of dominance.
- Never turn your back to a bear; if safe to do so, slowly walk backwards and give the bear as much space as possible
- Talk calmly and quietly so the bear can identify you as a human, and do your best to diffuse the situation

Occasionally a bear will bluff charge as its way of trying to resolve the situation on its own. This is when a bear charges, then stops short of you and veers off, running away. If you practice good bear etiquette this should never happen to you—but if it ever does, your body language in this situation could save your life. Stand your ground and hold as still as possible without making eye contact. Don't even take half a step backwards.

Once the bear is gone, promptly find a tree to hide behind and change your soiled drawers.

the help of Karelian Bear Dogs, which were recently introduced.

In the world of wildlife work, Karelian Bear Dogs (KBD) are priceless. Long used for hunting in northern Europe, this unique breed, when specially trained, can track bears and detect birds, shell casings, scat and other important items, as well as track down dead animals. In 2003, Mishka became the first KBD in the agency and assisted his handler, Rocky Spencer, to locate two dozen cougars in east King and south Snohomish Counties and, in turn, educate citizens on avoiding conflict.

When Spencer was tragically killed in 2007, Mishka went to work with Officer Richards and to this day continues to be an important part of the team. Recently, Mishka helped wildlife officials locate a den of three cougar kittens whose mother had been killed. Mishka has also been instrumental in tracking poachers in Olympic National Park and has even assisted in homicide investigations. Mishka is one of four KBDs in the agency today, but more are needed and funding is lacking.

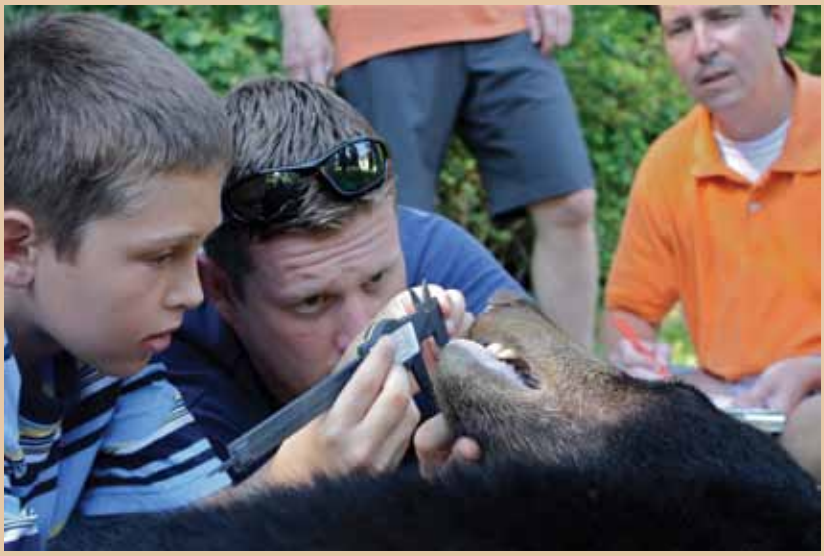
Officer Richards, Dr. Kertson and others in the agency are more than just officials with titles. They seem to all have a united passion for the creatures that share our forests and a strong desire to minimize wildlife conflict for those of us who love spending time in the outdoors. Through educational opportunities such as evening classes and public outreach, more and more of us are learning how to behave when we encounter a bear on trail or find wildlife in distress.

It's not only painted mountains that call me to wander the hilltop hinterlands, but also the creatures that live within its boundaries. As I wear down the soles of my hiking boots, I'm grateful and honored to know those who are working not only to protect our trails, but also to protect the wildlife that call them home.♦

For more information on how you can help, please visit www.wdfw.wa.gov/enforcement/kdb.

Tami Asars is a guidebook author and outdoor writer who lives in the Cascade foothills.

Justin K. helps Dr. Kertson measure the teeth on a sedated black bear. Photo by Tami Asars



Attention Photographers!

Are you looking to improve your photographic skill in the new year? The Appalachian Mountain Club has just released the new *AMC Guide to Outdoor Digital Photography: Creating Great Nature and Adventure Photos*, written by professional photographer Jerry Monkman.

Geared toward outdoor enthusiasts, this easy-to-read, full color guidebook encourages photographers to expand their photography skills beyond the basic, plus it helps experienced photographers hone techniques. Monkman covers the full spectrum of working with photography: from packing gear and finding inspiration to taking great shots and editing photos in the "digital darkroom."

With easy-to-follow instructions, case studies and expert advice, you will learn

- Gear and gear safety
- Telling stories with photos
- Shooting in different weather, lighting and seasonal conditions
- Perfecting composition and exposure
- Processing images using editing software
- Keeping photographs organized and safe

Also included is a section on additional recommended reading, software resources, and the ethics of being a conscientious photographer.

Jerry Monkman is a conservation photographer whose nature and adventure photographs have appeared in *National Geographic Adventure*, *Outdoor Photographer*, *Audubon*, *Men's Journal*, and *National Wildlife*.

Order your copy at **www.outdoors.org/amcstore** or by calling (800) 262-4455.