contents

Acknowledgments ix
The Metaphorical Bear 1
The Unseen Bear 13
The Hungry Bear 36
The Social Bear 68
The Urban Bear 102
The Fearsome Bear 134
The Hunted Bear 170
The Disappearing Ice Bear 203
The Watched Bear 239
The Predatory Bear 271
The Story of Bears 311
Notes 317
Bibliography 375
Index 419

Color photograph gallery follows page 140.
acknowledgments

So many of the people I met and interviewed during this project could and should write their own books about bears. I hope they do. In the meantime, I’m grateful to them for sharing their time, work, research, ideas, stories, and opinions. Some of their names appear in this book, and some don’t. My urge to consult every single bear researcher or expert on the planet was curtailed only by the constraints of time and space, but I could not have finished this book without relying on the work of many, many people I have never met.

I’m especially grateful to Larry Aumiller, Brian Barnes, Neil Barten, Bruce Bartley, Pete Buist, Jessy Coltrane, Pat Costello, Ken and Chris Day, Fred Dean, Terry DeBruyn, Andrew Derocher, Tom Evans, Craig George, Tom Griffin, Kathie Harms, Ernestine Hayes, John Hechtel, Grant Hilderbrand, Nick Jans, Charlie Johnson, Perry Matumeak, Joe Meehan, Susanne Miller, Patricia Owen, Josh and Kellie Peirce, Harry Reynolds, Mark Richards, John Schoen, Rick Sinnott, Derek Stonorov, and Vic Van Ballenberghe. Thank you to John Toppenberg of the Alaska Wildlife Alliance and Rod Arno and Patrick Valkenburg of the Alaska Outdoor Council for explaining their organizations’ positions. I owe a lot to Kim Titus and Vern Beier for allowing me to accompany them on a bear-tagging expedition on Admiralty Island years ago; they ignited my interest in the secret lives of bears. Sterling Miller’s expertise in bear science and his editorial suggestions were immensely important, and I can’t thank him enough for his careful and thorough review. I especially appreciate his permission to dispense with the unworthy terms “sow” and “boar” when referring to bears. John Hechtel, Vic Van Ballenberghe, and Mark Richards made helpful suggestions on specific sections. I also thank Andrew Derocher, Terry DeBruyn, Derek Stonorov, Richard Ellis, Nancy Lord, and Bill Sherwonit for reading the entire manuscript and providing comments. Any factual errors or misinterpretations are, of course, mine. My apologies to anyone I’ve inadvertently forgotten to thank; you can be sure I am grateful for your help.
Merry Ellefson generously shared her treasure trove of interviews with me, and Doug Fesler gave me an invaluable collection of historical newspaper articles that deserve their own chapter. Robyn Russell at the Elmer Rasmuson Library in Fairbanks and Justine Bishop at the Alaska State Archives in Juneau were very helpful. Thank you to Gary Porter for taking me to Geographic Harbor, and to Maurizio Zanin, Claudio Groff, and Piero Genovesi for letting me attend the sixteenth annual conference of the International Association for Bear Research and Management in Riva del Garda, Italy. I appreciate the generosity of photographers Kenneth Gill and Alan Wilson in sharing their images. Andri Grishkowsky and Robert Meyerowitz deserve special thanks for their encouragement and contributions. I appreciate the work of the many news reporters who provided valuable information. I’m also obligated to Stephen Colbert and his regular inclusion of bears in his “Threat Down” segments for providing years of laughs and periodic reminders of why a book like this is necessary.

Michael Briggs of the University Press of Kansas was unfailingly supportive and unbelievably patient; I cannot thank him enough for his keen insights and his hard work on behalf of this book. I was buoyed in the final stages by the encouragement, professionalism (and patience!) of Kelly Chrisman Jacques, Susan Schott, and Rebecca Murray Schuler. Linda Lotz performed heroic work as a copyeditor and saved me from myself many times.

I’m painfully aware of what’s not included in this book—enough to write another two or three books, really. Two perspectives in particular deserve more attention. For a deeper understanding of historical and contemporary relationships between Alaska Natives and bears, I recommend starting with Richard Nelson’s ethnographic studies, in particular Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest. And two remarkable new books beautifully describe the firsthand experience of the aftermath of a bear attack: Beyond the Bear: How I Learned to Live and Love Again after Being Blinded by a Bear by Dan Bigley and Debra McKinney (Lyons Press, 2013), and North of Hope: A Daughter’s Arctic Journey by Shannon Huffman Polson (Zondervan/Harper Collins, 2013).

Finally, I am beyond grateful to friends and family for years of help and encouragement. People who endured my various fits of despair and excitement and yet never expressed doubts (openly) about my sanity include Aisha Barnes, David Stevenson, Jo-Ann Mapson, Stewart Allison, and the Simpson, Hulbert, Monagle, and Kiefer clans. I promise never
to inflict another lecture on the wonders of bears and marine nitrogen cycles on them again. A multitude of friends, students, and acquaintances shared stories and information; their interest in bears sustained me.

Frankly, I consider it a miracle that I remain married. Scott Kiefer has done more housework, dog walking, listening, soothing, proofreading, and chocolate procuring than anybody should have to, and he did it with grace and love. I can’t repay him for this great gift, but I intend to try.
At first I didn’t notice the tracks pressed into the muddy trail. My dog and I were walking in the fading warmth of an October sun through an aspen forest not far from my house. Several paces beyond the prints, I stopped, suddenly aware of the image percolating through my thoughts. I retraced my steps to sort through a collage of impressions: the waffle tread of my boots, the deep crescents of moose hooves, the dog’s skidding feet, and there, beneath a confetti of golden tamarack needles, the crisp, familiar outlines of a bear’s front and rear paws.

That bears dwell in the wildlands edging Anchorage’s eastern flank didn’t surprise me. Thirty minutes of walking would take me into the foothills of the western Chugach Mountains, where black and brown bears den on alpine slopes and in the valleys. At least twenty brown bears regularly venture into the city’s margins, drawn by spawning salmon, vulnerable moose calves, berries galore. A few years before, a brown bear had killed and cached a moose within a hundred yards of where I stood. Knowing all this, I straightened from studying the trail to scan the surrounding forest. Leaves and needles scattered across the prints suggested there was no need for high alert, that a day or so had passed since the bear had paced along this path, head swinging, muzzle twitching. Yet even the air seemed charged by its presence, a lingering reminder that bears don’t live out there. They live here, with us. Nothing had changed, and everything had changed.

The slightest evidence that bears share your world—or that you share theirs—can alter not only your sense of the landscape but also your sense of yourself within that landscape. You look around hopefully, fearfully, expectantly, uncertainly, trying to decide if you feel threatened or enlarged, alarmed or invigorated, if you should retreat or press on. Once, after a friend and I noticed the fresh grooves of a bear’s claws scoring the tender cambium of a spruce tree, she confessed, “I just want to know
how to be around bears.” On this October day I looked at the bear tracks one more time, called to my dog, and kept walking because, like most Alaskans, I want to know how to be around bears, too.

Spending time outdoors in Alaska means cultivating an awareness of bears that is almost psychologically organic, a way of thinking and behaving that approaches the autonomic. I didn’t realize this until I lived for a few months in New Zealand, where the absence of snakes, scorpions, predators, or anything larger than feral swine and goats makes it one of the world’s most benign natural landscapes. Hiking there seemed no riskier than strolling the grounds of Buckingham Palace, yet I caught myself constantly on the verge of calling out, “Hey, bear!” at blind spots and in brushy corridors. Some part of me was always listening for the sound of breaking twigs, thudding paws, popping teeth. It wasn’t paranoia that I couldn’t relinquish, but a habit of mind developed in a place where bears are ever present in the wilderness and in our backyards.

Not only present, but a presence. They inhabit our conversations, headlines, stories, history, cultural practices, art, politics, imaginations. To catalog all the ways the ideas and images of bears invade daily life in Alaska would require a separate book. Once I counted twenty different bear images between the front doors of the Ted Stevens International Airport and my boarding gate. They appeared on socks and T-shirts, book covers and snack wrappers, notecards and an entire wall of McDonald’s. The state’s souvenir industry might collapse without bears. The Dictionary of Alaska Place Names lists more than 150 geographic features named after bears, including 69 different Bear Creeks. A silent menagerie of taxidermied brown, black, and polar bears populates hotel and bank lobbies, restaurants, libraries, stores, and airports (last time I counted, the airport in Anchorage had six bears, and the airports in Fairbanks and Juneau had four each). The state’s largest newspaper, the Anchorage Daily News, hosts an online gallery of bear photos submitted by readers—part of an entire section devoted to bear sightings, videos, and articles. At home, a polar bear greets me each day on a fridge magnet advertising a law office. They are the most coveted of animal endorsements in business names: Brown Bear Plumbing and Heating, Bear’s Nest Café, and Bear Asphalt and Construction are a few among hundreds. They lend ferocity to the Juneau-Douglas High Crimson Bears and the University of Alaska–Fairbanks Nanooks. And what else would
Kodiak High School choose as a mascot? Look around almost any Alaskan street, and somewhere a metaphorical or merchandised bear will be looking back at you.

Even the state flag acknowledges the dominion of bears. Against a deep blue background, the golden stars of the Big Dipper point toward the North Star. “The Dipper is for the Great Bear—symbolizing strength,” explained thirteen-year-old Benny Benson, whose flag design won a 1926 competition. Few Alaskans today recognize the Great Bear as the nymph Callisto, who was impregnated by Zeus and transmogrified into a bear by his jealous wife, Hera. Sixteen years later Callisto’s son, Arcas, nearly speared his unrecognizable bear-mother before Zeus took pity and fixed them both in the sky as the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. Hera’s final revenge ensured that neither would ever dip below the horizon for a drink or a bath. Thus, by stars and by flag, by night and by day, Alaskans live under the sign of the bear.

Today, Alaska serves as a refugium for intact populations of bears and for ideas about bears. More than 70 percent of North America’s brown bears live in Alaska. Altogether an estimated 31,000 brown bears, maybe 100,000 black bears, and perhaps 3,500 polar bears inhabit the state, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. (Brown bears and grizzly bears are actually the same species, Ursus arctos, but the coastal bears that grow so large from eating salmon are generally called brown bears, and the smaller, inland dwellers are called grizzlies.) Place and animal are bound so tightly that they amplify each other, transform into metaphors of each other, fuse into a mythos in which one could not exist without the other. Nearly every aspect of northern society reflects this dynamic, from tourism marketing to wildlife management to urban planning. As the most mega of the charismatic megafauna, bears radiate a pure animal glamour of grandness, power, and beauty, tinged by the irresistible aura of danger. We admire them, photograph them, hunt them, fear them, tell stories about them. We notice how we resemble them, and vice versa, in our shared ability to stand on two legs, preference for an omnivorous diet, sense of curiosity, and adaptable intelligence. Alaska Native peoples recall an older way of knowing bears—as a living mercantile that supplied hides, bones, and flesh, and as a spiritual go-between that shifted between the physical and the cosmic dimensions. To borrow shamelessly from the lexicon of conservation biology, bears function as a keystone species in northern cultural ecologies.
both indigenous and transplanted. They’re so critical to the whole that if they were removed, an important system of beliefs and values would collapse.

Historians continue to debate whether Alaska deserves to be considered “exceptional” or merely “different.” It’s true that nearly 85 percent of the state’s residents live in urban communities where the likes of Home Depot, Netflix, and Costco continue to colonize the Last Frontier of merchandising. It’s also true that many other states take pride in their mountains, forests, wildlife, salmon, glaciers, and harsh winter weather. But almost nowhere else do so many people live in such close quarters with so many bears, and maybe this qualifies as the ultimate measure of exceptionalism.

“It is difficult to envision what the popular image of Alaska might be, or how Alaskans would see themselves, or what would happen to their unique sense of place, if there were no more bears in the state,” observes Morgan Sherwood in his history of wildlife management, Big Game in Alaska. Alaskans certainly don’t hesitate to indulge in self-exceptionalism when it comes to bears. Residency allows everyone to play two easy cards: one that says, Eh, it’s no big deal to live in bear country, and another that declares, No kidding, you could die almost anytime you step outside your front door. Without the threat of bears, what true dangers would a pioneer face, now that weather satellites, cell phones, snowblowers, central heating, and annual Permanent Fund dividend checks have eased the frontier’s privations?

So cherished is the notion of the rugged Alaskan that an entire genre of reality TV has been developed to prop up this northern mythology with such shows as Deadliest Catch, Flying Wild Alaska, Gold Rush Alaska, Alaska Wing Men, Ice Road Truckers, Tougher in Alaska, Cowboys of the Sea, and Extreme Alaska. A series tentatively titled The Frontiersmen will drop contestants into the boonies to battle for survival. Discovery Channel president and general manager Clark Bunting explained the appeal in an Anchorage Daily News article: “So many people today drive to the office in an economy car. Then they work in a cubicle. And then they go to the big box stores on the weekend,” he said. “What Alaska really represents for a lot of people right now, is the true pioneer spirit.”

The most unreal of these reality shows, Sarah Palin’s Alaska, didn’t miss the opportunity to demonstrate this spirit by using bears as a dramatic foil. “Our ruggedness is really a mystery in the Lower 48 states,”
Palin explained to the camera. During that episode she abandoned the family’s RV to take fellow celebrity Kate Gosselin and her eight children camping. Gosselin’s deep alarm upon learning that bears live in the wilderness was a cue for the self-styled “Mama Grizzly” to shepherd Gosselin through a bear safety class and to visit a gun shop for advice on the best bear-stopping weapon (a shotgun, she learned). “If you are unarmed and you’re out in the wilderness, well, you’re putting yourself and your family in danger,” Palin warned. Personally, I can’t imagine why any self-respecting bear would go near ten children, several adults, and a camera crew out in the “wilderness,” even if the expedition did leave inviting coolers of food outside.

But we can hardly blame Palin for mouthing the sentiments Alaskans have worked so industriously to keep alive, or for invoking some of the most potent elements of American frontier identity as inventoried by historian Frederick Jackson Turner—independence, resourcefulness, self-reliance, adventurousness, the determination to pursue every opportunity and conquer any obstacle. This is how Merle Colby characterized northerners in his 1939 guide to Alaska: “Bestriding two worlds of time, often isolated from his fellow citizens of the United States and even from his fellow Alaskans, the white frontiersman has something of the character of a westerner of Andrew Jackson’s day, but without the Jacksonian's provincialism.” During World War II Colby produced the pamphlet What Has Alaska to Offer Postwar Pioneers? Nothing less than challenge and opportunity, he assured veterans, reminding them in a stirring introduction that “pioneer is a magic word in American history,” and “the frontier is bred into our bones.” In 1965 Life magazine published this description of a homesteader who had arrived four decades earlier: “There is the look of the frontier about Alaska, and you see it too in the faces of her old-time residents like Shorty Bradley—men whose migration into the north country was a natural extension of the movement into the American West.” Those who built Alaska were men “who drew strength from the struggle with nature,” the article added.

Teasing out the multiple meanings of the words wildness, wilderness, nature, and frontier remains the fractious work of cultural and historical scholars—the splitters, in taxonomic jargon. In contrast, we lumpers toss about these words and concepts as we please, glibly substituting them for one another, happily unconcerned with intellectual lineages and philosophical debates. Is wildness a condition or a concept? Are we supposed to tame nature, enshrine it, or infuse ourselves with it? We
do know, however, that the quickest way to figure out the difference between wilderness and civilization is to locate the bears. “Question—Why do we tolerate bears in Anchorage?” a resident asked in response to an Alaska Dispatch story about bear safety. “Would an African city, comparable in size to Anchorage, tolerate lions within the core of their city? If within 10 minutes a person can be eating a Big Mac, watching the latest IMAX movie, and/or shopping at a mall, then they do not live in the wild.” Bears, oddly enough, don’t seem to follow the same criteria.

Sharp-eyed scholars rummaging through the past have located the hulking figure of the bear loitering at the corner of wilderness and frontier. “From the nineteenth century on, bears symbolized the power, strangeness, extravagance, and wildness of the West,” historian Patricia Nelson Limerick remarks in The Legacy of Conquest. As it turned out, settlers loved the idea of renewing and reinventing themselves in the frontier’s open expanses, but they didn’t care for some of its inhabitants. They feared grizzly bears as a danger to themselves, a threat to their livestock, and an impediment to the orderly development of a new agricultural empire. As the twentieth century approached, anxiety over the rapid depletion of wilderness, wildlife, and natural resources only amplified the suspicion that the frontier era was over, as Frederick Jackson Turner argued in 1893. Gold rushes in Alaska and the Yukon redirected the nation’s gaze toward the distant, perilous North as a place where people could still live out that old dream of natural riches and abundant animals there for the taking. “While the sourdough with his pick and pan personified the go-getter on the Last Frontier, wild animals just as surely symbolized the Alaskan wilderness,” writes historian Theodore Catton in Inhabited Wilderness.

Few wilderness symbols serve as many different aims as the brown bear, so easily incarnated as commodity and killer, trophy and impediment, victim and vermin. As Edward Hoagland once wrote, “Animals are stylized characters in a kind of old saga—stylized because even the most acute of them have little leeway as they play out their parts.” Neither do people, apparently. As the wilderness ideals of Outsiders butted against the frontier mentality of Alaska’s pioneers, bears became a convenient symbol of either old mistakes or future obstacles. Then, as now, Alaskans were aggravated by game policies intended to prevent a recurrence of past excesses or to make up for them. People who had chewed up their own wilderness and spit it out had a lot of nerve asking for a
do-over in Alaska, the thinking went. “The conservation associations
look upon the brown bear as a unique animal, his last stamping ground
as Alaska, and wish him preserved. They are very silly about it, and never
having been to Alaska, you can realize how they visualize the country,”
wrote Governor Thomas Riggs Jr. to The Western Sportsman in 1920.

Most Alaskans considered bears a dangerous hindrance to progress
for the same reasons that inspired westerners to cull bears and other
predators from their lands. “If Alaska is ever to become a country of
homes it is high time to commence to exterminate their greatest enemy
and also at the same time the greatest enemy to the increase of other
game animals which are not destructive,” Fairbanks resident George
Wilson wrote in support of Riggs’s campaign to exterminate bears. The
governor’s crusade failed, yet in 1938 a biologist for the Alaska Game
Commission still harbored the delusion that a cattle industry could suc-
cceed in Alaska “were it not for the presence of the bear in such quan-
tities.” As late as 1963, Kodiak cattle ranchers were so sure—and so
wrong—that brown bears had foiled their success that they methodi-
cally tried to wipe them out using poison, bait, snares, and a semiauto-
matic weapon mounted on a small plane. “Civilization is moving north,
and the bear is going to have to give way,” explained a rancher with an
instinctive grasp of manifest destiny.

By then, the grizzly had given way almost entirely in the Lower 48.
An estimated 700 to 800 bears persisted in isolated pockets of Wy-
oming, Montana, Idaho, and Washington when the species was assigned
federal “threatened” status. Even as outdoors-minded Americans were
stampeding into national parks, hungry for natural experiences and
“untouched” landscapes, bears seemed bound for the realm of the
passenger pigeon. “The grandest and most powerful living symbol of
wilderness in America is struggling for survival,” nature writer David
Petersen wrote in Mother Earth News in 1985. Lose all the bears, and we’ll
lose a necessary humility, bear researcher and author Doug Peacock told
him. “The grizzly bear offers us one of our very few remaining oppor-
tunities to sample a little of the wild and woolly flavor of the American
West our forefathers knew.”

A similar symbolic transaction occurs in Alaska not because there
are too few bears but because there are so many. It works something
like this: bears equal wildness, wildness equals wilderness, wilderness
equals Alaska, therefore bears equal Alaska and Alaska equals bears.
Alaska Airlines’ in-flight magazine explained it like this: “Land of Bears.
At home amid ice floes, crystal rivers or dark forests, bears make Alaska wild.” Three separate photographs of brown bears illustrate the “Experience Alaska” page on the state’s official travel site. Try googling any variety of “Alaska pristine wilderness bear” to see how tightly these ideas are knotted together. Sometimes the words frontier and wilderness are treated interchangeably, as in the National Geographic series Bears of the Last Frontier. Nevertheless, host Chris Morgan made the connection between bears and Alaska perfectly clear: “Bears conjure up a sense of wild. And for just about everyone, Alaska does the same thing.” For a hunter whose online identity is “.338 mag,” it’s as simple as this: “The Brown/Grizzly bears of Alaska are what makes this the Last Frontier.”

This idea was minted—literally—in 2007 with the unveiling of a commemorative quarter celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of statehood. Alaskans could vote informally for the image they preferred—a sled dog team, a gold panner, a polar bear, or a brown bear—but then-governor Sarah Palin made the final choice: the brown bear. “I think nothing could be more Alaskan,” she said. These were wilderness words concealing frontier meanings. Two weeks after she announced the quarter’s design, she introduced a bill to allow the aerial shooting of brown bears, wolves, and wolverines in areas where the Board of Game had approved predator control as a way to boost harvests of moose and caribou for hunters. (The bill died in committee.) The following year she sued the federal government for listing polar bears as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act. Protecting polar bears, she said, would have a “significant adverse impact on Alaska by deterring activities such as commercial fisheries, oil and gas exploration and development, transportation, and tourism within and off-shore of Alaska.” The frontier philosophy of territorial governor Thomas Riggs Jr. lives on.

When I first began thinking about bears, I harbored the misty-eyed notion that Alaskans were changing the way they thought about bears and therefore about wilderness. Maybe, I thought, we’re figuring out that we can coexist with bears rather than subdue or eliminate or fear them. Two trends intrigued me. The first was a boom in bear viewing throughout coastal Alaska. Ever-growing numbers of visitors paid hundreds of dollars to watch bears they had no desire to shoot with anything but cameras. Surely people were finally realizing that bears aren’t the crazed killers of hunting tales and folklore. The second important change occurred in my hometown, Juneau. As a newspaper reporter there, I had

8 Dominion of Bears
once watched a wildlife official shoot a black bear in the head because it had repeatedly raided garbage bins. Years of earnest discussion and halfhearted attempts to change the community’s habits led only to more dead bears. Finally, a couple of admirable gadflies pestered municipal officials into an unusually prolonged bout of common sense, and the community worked out successful strategies to better protect black bears and people from each other.

I never imagined that Alaska would somehow develop a postfrontier, postcolonial enlightenment, but I failed to understand how powerful some old habits were. For decades, the public scrum over predator control focused on wolves, until it dawned on people that bears also eat moose and caribou calves before the youngsters grow into their legs and can outrace them. Now the wilderness is parcelled into “predator control areas,” where hunting ethics don’t apply and the clock is rolled back to the good old territorial days, circa 1900, and you can shoot as many bears as you like, kill cubs and mothers, trap bears, and sell hides. This wildlife policy is pure frontierism—bears are eating moose and caribou that belong to people!—but it’s a policy enshrined in a state statute and supported more by wishful thinking than solid science. “The current attitude toward grizzly bears in Alaska is akin to attitudes that existed 100 years ago in the 48 U.S. states and poses a threat to the largest population of grizzly bears in North America,” blogged former Alaska bear biologist Sterling Miller in 2012. Miller is one of several retired wildlife biologists who have criticized the state’s practices as complacent, applied as if there were an endless supply of bears emanating from some underground conduit secreted in the wilderness. In the meantime, although bears may be eating more moose and caribou calves in some places, the Board of Game hasn’t eased off killing wolves.

Nobody can seriously argue that Alaska is in immediate danger of running out of bears. Hunters kill an average of 2,800 black bears and 1,450 brown bears each year. Most are killed for sport, some are eaten, and some are dispatched for predator control. A few score are shot by frightened home owners, struck by cars and trains, exterminated as nuisance bears, and wounded or killed by armed backcountry travelers. Still, it’s impossible to ignore the gradual recapitulation of the West, the persistent attitude that bears are less a necessity than a dangerous nuisance or even a hindrance. “Alaska is being chopped, minced, and grated,” wrote one of the state’s first professional wildlife biologists in 1975. Frederick Dean pointed out that the range of grizzly bears in
the Lower 48 had shriveled from a substantial territory to “remnant ribbons, islands and pockets” in just fifty years. He recognized the threats that would inevitably affect Alaska’s bears, too: resource development and extraction, the expansion of towns and the establishment of new settlements in wildlife habitat, and the “skyrocketing” recreational use of the backcountry, a factor too easily overlooked by wilderness lovers. “Bears will be killed directly, and bear range will be challenged and converted,” Dean wrote. “The pressure will come from the periphery and will also propagate in the manner of frost cracks, dissecting the broad expanses of bear range.” More of us means less of everything else, so far. This is the modern methodology of a modern frontier: not wholesale slaughter, but attrition, inattention, ignorance, expediency, inevitability.

Some things have changed since the old frontier became the Last Frontier. Many people recognize the truth as stated by retired bear biologist John Hechtel: “The bottom line is we are competitors with large carnivores, and humans won the competition. Humans must now decide where and how to conserve carnivores and how much of their habitat we are willing to protect.” This is true even in Alaska, where enormous blocks of national parklands and designated wilderness areas protect habitat and blunt some effects of human development. But as Dean pointed out decades ago, bears don’t recognize park boundaries, and many preserves, refuges, and state parks allow hunting. Outside of predator control areas, wildlife officials manage most bear populations to maintain their numbers, or at least to prevent them from declining too precipitously, even if no one’s sure what those numbers are. Many communities are working to reduce conflicts with bears, and maybe someday reducing the bear population won’t be the solution by default. Some hunters are genuine conservationists who want to protect bears. Other people who enjoy hunting bears would never want to eradicate all of them: what would be the fun in that?

Yet there is something deeply emblematic in the way frontier thinking persists. Take the story of the “ghost grizzly” told by legendary trapper and predator killer Frank Glaser. He believed the enormous bear denned not far from his cabin, in what was then known as Mount McKinley National Park. In nine years, Glaser had spotted its tracks many times but had seen the bear itself just twice—once when he killed the bear’s mate, and again when he crossed its trail one October. He shot the half-ton bear numerous times before it died. “It was my ghost grizzly all right, for
I never saw those big tracks heading cross-country again,” he recalled. And then he added, “I missed him.”

There you have the story of the frontier in two sentences—the impulse to kill a predator, because that’s what you do with predators, followed by lasting regret at its absence, because that absence erodes the wilderness and your own idea of yourself. In this way, we turn the bear into a symbol for everything we’ve lost—or, rather, everything we’ve given away—in the landscape and in ourselves. “Why does our fascination with grizzlies continue?” asked Outdoor Life editor Todd Smith. “Perhaps it’s because they remind us of that secret part of ourselves that longs to be something the grizzly bear has always been . . . indomitable, wild and free.” It’s quite a burden for one animal, forcing it to represent both wilderness and the loss of wilderness, the wildness of Mother Nature and the wildness of our hidden natures.

I’m not a scholar, historian, wildlife biologist, or politician. I’m merely an Alaskan who, like many others, has encountered bears in situations both frightening and mind-blowing. Yet how little I still know about this animal with which I share a home. As a backcountry traveler and a responsible citizen of the urban-wild interface, as it’s so awkwardly called, I’m eager to understand bear behavior and human behavior around bears. I want to know what they eat, how they survive, how they shape the landscape itself.

Our way of thinking about bears interests me, too. We recruit them into a kind of metaphorical servitude, using them to represent how we regard the land, remember the past, imagine the future, see ourselves. In Alaska, people encounter bears in a multitude of situations, and how we create or react to those encounters tends to cast bears into preordained roles. What’s so difficult is looking past labels and beyond images to see the living animal within the imagined bear, the individual bear rather than the caricatured species. “Most folks can never really see a bear for what it is—their view is obstructed by their vantage point,” Alaska bear researcher Terry DeBruyn told his colleagues at a workshop on bear-people conflicts. “We must recognize that every second of every day can be a life or death matter to a bear. And, while that may sound trite, nothing I know of is truer.”

At one time I imagined this book as an inquiry into relationships between people and bears in Alaska. The fundamental flaw in this idea is
that a one-way transaction is not a relationship. We can get along without bears—billions of us do every day—and surely they’d be better off without us. Even if I mounted some novel argument on behalf of bears that had not already been made by people far smarter and more eloquent, I’d really be arguing only for myself. In *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*, the brilliant naturalist John Livingston gently dismantles every rationale for championing conservation because all such assertions are inherently a matter of self-interest, no matter how well-intentioned or desirable the outcome. “Argument, it seems to me, is never going to help wildlife,” he wrote. “It rarely has, and there is little to persuade me that it ever will, appreciably. . . . I believe that wildlife preservation is entirely dependent upon individual human experience.”

So this is not a book about relationships with bears. It’s a book about experiences with bears, as they are part of my world and part of me. Some experiences are wholly mine (though Livingston would say that gathering the experiences of others makes those mine, too). Some are from people with far greater knowledge and more intimate experience than I will ever have. And some of these experiences come from bears, because they experience us, too.

When I ask people why they like bears, they say the usual sorts of things—they’re magnificent, they make me feel humble, they remind me of who we used to be, they’re just plain cool—not because their ideas are trite but because words can’t express these experiences very well. Words are beside the point, anyway. The presence of a wild bear, the experience of a wild bear, sizzles through the nerves, jolts the heart, startles the brain; it strips away that filter that separates us from the world and allows us to become part of that world more completely. My friend Jennifer said it first: I just want to know how to be around bears. Maybe it’s more essential than that. Maybe we’re drawn to bears because we just want to know how to be.