**The Grizzly Beat**

**Transcript**

**Rick Bass**

**Episode 17**

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Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox with the Grizzly Beat. And we’re here today with Rick Bass, who is a world renowned writer and conservation advocate -- and he lives here in Montana. But he was born in Fort Worth, Texas and he studied petroleum geology at Utah State University, and he started to write short stories on his lunch breaks when he was working as a petroleum geologist in Mississippi. And then in 1987 he moved with his wife to the remote Yaak Valley, where he works to protect his adopted home from roads, logging and now, out-of-control recreationists. Rick has written countless magazine articles and essays and stories, and over 30 fiction and non-fiction books, including his not to be missed, most recent collection of short stories For a Little While. His list of writing awards are as long as your arm -- and I have to give you a personal warning, you just can’t read his work without falling in love with Wilderness, grizzly bears, wolves all over again. And if you haven’t yet engaged in advocacy to save our small planet, you may find yourself plunging in. Thanks, Rick, for being here.

Rick Bass: Thank you Louisa, It’s a great honor and thanks for the program and all that you do for bears and everything else wild.

L: Well, we all try. So Rick, you’ve been an enormous fan of grizzly bears and wilderness and have been one of its most eloquent spokesman for decades now. Maybe you can share an experience with a bear that you found particularly powerful.

R: Anytime you’re fortunate enough to see a bear, any kind of bear, grizzly or black, any kind of bear, it changes your day, changes your week, it recalibrates how you think about yourself. It’s like seeing a gorilla; you’re just struck by the sentience and intelligence of the animal. It recalibrates this myth this perception we have that because our brains are pretty big, we’ve got everything figured out. They’ve been here a lot longer and they have a lot, we have a lot in similar with them and you’re reminded how much alike we are and like them when you see them.

And again you’re humbled, you’re reminded that they’re a lot closer to having it figured out than we are. They’ve been here a lot longer, and inhabit the world with greater -- I guess what we’d called sophistication, greater elegance of fit. It’s pretty amazing just to get a glimpse of them. All the old clichés are true. You’re reminded of how we’re not the most not only -- there are different ways to measure intelligence, but you’re also reminded that, “wow we’re really puny and frail and lucky to be here.”

I had one of those wonderful adrenalizing encounters just this summer with a big female with her large sub-adult -- in fact I saw her sub-adult and thought it was a mature bear. And then I saw her stand up behind it, and she came running down the trail -- or not the trail, over the ridge at me -- I was on the trail, and had never had that experience in the Yaak. The grizzlies I’ve been fortunate to see up here have always just run like greyhounds away from me if they saw me, or scented me, or heard me, and this one -- the set up was just all wrong, which is what happens eventually if you spend enough time in the woods. You’re going to -- it’s just going to be a bad set up. And she -- it was a bluff charge, but I didn’t know that -- and was fortunate to have bear spray with me, which I just can’t recommend enough to carry it with you. And she turned away at 10-15 feet just like they almost always do. It was weird. Her sub-adult ran south and up and over this same hill that she had come over, just took out of there. But she came back a second time. That was really interesting. A little less fervor, but then she went behind me like she was trying to cut off my back trail, so it was exciting.

And you prepare for it. You practice situations thinking when you’re talking to the bears even though you know they’re not, when you realize you’re in a place where they could be or should be, and so it wasn’t a surprise and I knew what to do from all of the thinking about it, but. It definitely stays with you a good long while. And my overwhelming reaction was apology or regret that I had stressed her out like that. There wasn’t anything I could have done, but it was just the two of us in one space and she just said her piece and then left, which I thought was really -- I’m grateful for that.

You’ll see this time of year, you’ll see hunters, you know elk hunters, bow hunters and even rifle hunters with these damn hog-leg pistol arrows on their shoulder harnesses and stuff, it’s just heartbreaking. It’s generally the folks who carry the compound bows also rather than traditional bow hunters. But even those you just see -- people going on hikes with their kids huckleberry picking with a these six shooters on their hips and stuff just flapping around it’s like: if it’s that dangerous, if you really feel that way about it, why would you be taking your children into a war zone where you feel you need to shoot your way out of it with this huge caliber pistol that’s going to enrage the bear, probably won’t kill it with one shot. You might miss it etc etc. You might shoot yourself; you might shoot whoever you’re with.

It’s just something we don’t talk about enough is: “enough with the pistols folks, just get a tube of bear spray, know where it is on your hip and walk.” It’s a lot lighter, a lot quieter, a lot safer, a lot cheaper. You don’t go to the woods with a pistol unless you aim to kill something. The default when you put that pistol on, you’re not thinking: “I’m going to protect myself,” you’re thinking: “I’m going to kill something if I see it or if it comes at me.” And I just don’t think people have thought this through about what an awful amount of legal hassle and ecological upset that is for an endangered species, but it’s kind of -- I just don’t think people have thought about it enough. So all that’s to say, I’m really here to testify to bear spray and say, “just get a tube and take it with you and everything will be fine.”

L: Thank you. So Rick you’ve written and spoken so much about the mystery of wolves and bears and also about what were just mentioning, about how some people just don’t seem to get it and aerially gun down wolves, and just unnecessarily end up killing stuff. Why do you think that is? Why do you think some people just don’t get it?

It’s a pretty easy answer. It’s how white folks just became part of the culture template from the day we first crossed the Mississippi. All of our journals and narratives are about seeing animals of force – or indeed people of force, and moving them out. And there were just no stories, no culture, no pathways of not killing bears or not killing wolves. It’s true enough. They were hell on stock -- and that was kind of our middle name back then, was cattle and sheep. But that’s not our middle name now. And we are making adjustments with those I want to say “hobbies” there, it’s not a hobby for some folks but it’s increasingly or decreasingly a life way: but regardless, we just don’t have enough bears and wolves to be perpetuating that saga of shooting the grizzly in the corral, or shooting the wolf at the edge of the pasture.

There are other avenues, other ways to protect your sheep and cattle and horses. I said it: we’re starting to figure that out. We’ve invested 40 years of relationship re-accommodation with grizzlies through the Endangered Species Act. And we’ve got a generation or two of people who are starting to figure it out: okay, your first inclination upon seeing a bear is not to shoot it and kill it, but to be thrilled that you had the good fortune to see it. And it takes a long time. It takes several generations for a culture to get deeply set -- and especially when you’re erasing an old culture and resetting a new one -- it can take 50 or 100 years.

So we’re getting closer, which of course makes the proposed Yellowstone delisting all the wackier. How schizophrenic is that to spend 40 years cultivating a relationship between bears and humans where the bears run away, or learn to coexist in valley bottoms, and avoid dog food and avoid bird feeder seed, and tip toe around at night and not get in trouble, and people don’t get in trouble. And we’re having a shot at changing the relationship. And now just to flip it overnight, what are the bears going to make of that? It’s going to set back the relationship between humans and bears irreparably for us to all of the sudden say: “Oh no, we changed our mind, we’re protecting you for 40 years but now were going to start killing again. Sorry we were mistaken, fooled you.”

You know it’s just; it’s so abrupt, so human, so polarized, so schizophrenic. It’s classic human behavior, first we’re one way, and then were another. You talk about bears being unpredictable. The only thing unpredictable in this equation is humans.

L: Right, and Yellowstone is only the beginning. The government is proposing maybe by the end of this year to strip federal protections for Yellowstone bears, but then come Glacier bears.

R: It’s an unsophisticated, really brutal primitive political play with -- they think they’re being tricky. It’s not chess it’s just checkers. And we’ve known that was their goal. They’ve actually been pretty frank about it all along saying, “Well, we want to delist the grizzly everywhere as fast as we can.” And that’s the discussions that they have in rural communities. Setting up rural communities for expectations that cannot be met, and should not be met, with the speed with which these discussions and expectations are being promoted: “Well let’s combine the Cabinet and the Yaak, well let’s combine the Cabinet and the Yaak and the Selkirk population. Ah let’s combine the Cabinet the Yaak the Selkirk and the Glacier population. In fact, you know what? Let’s just say there are a lot of grizzly bears in Alaska, let’s just say they’re recovered.”

It’s humiliating to have your government masquerading as scientists with these discussions where they already know the answer they want, and they’re just doing this really basic kindergarten primary math 1+ 1 + 1 trying to get to the answer that they want.

If you have any kind of scientific training, it’s even more outrageous to see what they’re presenting as science -- and it’s just brute politics. Surprise!

L: But brute politics for what Rick? I mean what do you think undergirds all of this?

R: I think it’s not that complicated, but as dear friend Doug Peacock would say: “I think chicken shit underlies it all.” Government is afraid of the raucous self-pitying whining voice of the so-called libertarian West, you know the one percent of backwoods hermits who claim that government is medaling too much in their lives when actually the West is the most subsidized region in America. We would not exist out here without the roads, and the schools, and the county payments, and everything else that makes this place habitable for white folks in puffy down vests 12 months a year.

At any rate I think it’s a real lack of resolve and spine by surprise -- politicians who don’t get elected and reelected by sticking their head out and neck out and doing the right thing. I think they’re so easily cowed by a few vehement voices of dissent and not much influenced by science unfortunately. And we don’t really have a tradition of politicians listening to science. But I think politicians are intimidated by science because they perceive it to be difficult. And it’s up to activists such as ourselves to speak louder and longer -- and also more factually and truthfully -- than the inflammatory opposition. It’s just kind of hand-to-hand combat with a few old dying blow-hards. It would be all the worst shame to see in their dying last generational gasps to get the better of Yellowstone grizzlies and Montana grizzlies, which have been through so much for so long and are still hanging on.

We lost the last grizzly in California, we’ve lost the last grizzly in Colorado, in Utah, state by state, they blink out. And that’s what makes Montana most special and better than the other Western states: it is our big country and the grizzlies we still have left in it. And to open up a sport hunting international season on them just -- not only is it devastating to the bears whose demographics we still don’t know, how many old bears how many females, how many young, how many sub-adults, what are their relationships, what’s their connection across populations? Despite not knowing what we need to know about those things, we’ve just changed the relationship. It would become a place where bears were frightened, which is consistently non-stop frightened. And that’s not the identity of a grizzly bear. Ironically, paradoxically, that does not serve us best to have bears frightened all the time. They need to respect people, but they also need to learn how to coexist -- not view us as the enemy and vice versa.

L: Rick you have written a lot on the states and role of the states and the even problems of state wildlife management, particularly in your Nine Mile wolf book, and obviously after delisting management of bears would return to the states. Maybe you can share some of your views and concerns about state management.

R: Yeah, sure. And it’s again it’s not really rocket science but any kind of cycle of deep experience with these issues is going to point out what I think is pretty obvious, is the volatility of state politics does not bode well for long term consistency that’s required for recovery of an endangered species. I don’t think the states -- even the good states -- are set up to recover threatened and endangered species. There’s too much of a profit motive if it’s something that’s huntable.

Why, we think that if a bear goes off an endangered species list, we have to go out and hunt it? Again, that’s maddening too. Why is that our default response when something is recovered like the Coeur d’Alene salamander or the long toed salamander if we ever get that off the list, we’re going to go out and have a gigging season for them? That’s what’s been wired into us, is this short term extractive, “take take take” mentality. But at any rate, the states have with their short cycles -- and especially the western states with the volatility of party politics -- that would amplify the already existing schizophrenic impulse of government.

And it’s just all -- and then that’s further amplified when you’ve got a species like a grizzly that’s the second slowest reproducing land mammal in the world. The slowest reproducing land mammal in North America. It’s just not something to be playing fast and loose with and “if we make a mistake, we’ll get it right with the next administration.” One really bad administration at the state level could essentially send something that we thought was recovered into extinction. An animal that at best has a reproductive rate of two to three percent a year, that’s just foolish to match those dynamics up with volatile state politics and very slow, very slow if any recovery that we see in bears.

L: So Rick if you were appointed say grizzly bear czar and had all the authority in the world, what would you do to recovery grizzly bears?

R: What’s ironic is there’s nothing new here. We know to not kill them, we know they need big wild country. The open road density on public lands in the West is just laughable. Again, it’s undignified, it’s humiliating to see government agencies, Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service, with folks who went into the business thinking they were going to help animals, just over time becoming government bureaucrats and trying to reduce this mysterious relationship and wonderful relationship between wild nature and people to the enumeration of mathematics, saying: “Okay, well this one study in the Flathead shows that bear survival is increased at 59.5 percent closed road density, and so that’s what we’re going to do on the Kootenai, that’s what we’re going to do in Yellowstone Ecosystem, that’s what we’re going to do here.” It’s just not enough science for these big decisions to be made, so I would continue to advocate bear spray over pistols.

I would be more -- I would give more power to local managers who know the site specific places where bears are to protect those with buffer areas from black bear hunters.

And we’ve got all the pieces. The state is doing a good job of outreach to beekeepers and chicken farmers and goat farmers and stuff -- three deadly sins in grizzly country -- and they’re trying to electrify the shit out of these really dangerous operations in the heart of the grizzly recovery area.

But road closures are ineffective, and I would say 70 percent of the road closures on the Kootenai are not effectively closed. At least 60, it could actually be more than that. It’s just really disappointing.

That would be our first step is to reassess. What is a grizzly core look like? How big is it and how does it connect to other areas? Right now it’s just a rotating musical chairs opening and closing of gated roads. It’s got to be confusing to that maternal culture. Even with a ten year closure, even if it was effectively closed, which it’s not, the female, say a 7 year old female has a 2 year old when Kelly hump is laid in. And then she goes off and has maybe one more cycle of cubs, and then in the tenth year, she’s got another two year old with her, an infant, a true cub, and she’s got to go someplace new and learn that place new and teach that cub. Ten years is not core habitat. Protecting something from road building for ten years, that’s a blink of an eye to a grizzly.

I think another great area for improvement is just making our wilderness areas bigger. We don’t need to be logging at the perimeters of these logging areas. We’ve gotten god knows more than enough wood down around towns and villages, and the market continues to plummet. It’s logging in the Pacific Northwest and northwestern Montana is evermore sending small diameter wood other places. We sure don’t need to be spending taxpayer money to be reopening old roads that are grown in, much less blading new ones and going into the backcountry where the bears -- that the bears really rely on -- in the name of timber. There’s more timber than we can, as they say, shake a stick at just right along the open roads. It’s falling down, it’s got increased mortality from surprise -- global warming.

It’s a long answer to your question but we know how to do what needs doing we just need some unification, and not to have this schizophrenic response where we start out doing the right thing and then 6 months later, 18 months later, reverse and do the absolute worst thing. Which brings me to this goofy ass Pacific Trail that they’re trying to send to the upper Yaak. It’s so schizophrenic. You’ve got Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service who up here is no friend to the grizzly bear. I just have to say it. On the Kootenai, permitting their mines in the wilderness, and having these ineffective road densities, and claiming that the Yaak population of grizzlies is the same as the Glacier population of grizzlies, so they can do the same thing with trails that Glacier does with trails. We’ve got 20 bears maybe. We might have five breeding age females, if that many. To have poor service leadership here on the Kootenai -- comparing the Yaak to Glacier -- as justification for supporting this goofy Pacific Trail that will go through the upper heart of the Yaak is, just again, it’s heartbreaking, it’s humiliating. It’s like: we deserve better. We deserve better. If they’re going to be bureaucrats and administrators that’s fine, but we deserve better ones than what we’ve got. So we’re fighting that.

I mean this proposal to send four thousand permitted through hikers on their recreational two week get-away, starting in Glacier and driving through like the Golden Spike with their territorial imperative to get to the shining coast. The shortest direct red line possible drawn by bureaucrats in Portland right through the Yaak. You’ve got the schizophrenia of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service saying: “okay, well the law has made us have core grizzly habitat dedicated up here in the upper Yaak.” And these four thousand people per year per minute, plus who knows how many unpermitted with their barking dogs and bicycles and so forth, won’t affect these bears? Well they will affect these bears. That’s what’s called a high use human recreational trail, and it has legal standing as a corridor, or the same as if you were to drive a car or motorcycle down that trail, it’s going to affect grizzlies, it’s going to affect humans -- and neither for the positive.

The fact that this red line drawn by the bureaucrats who’ve never been in the Yaak travels along the Canadian border where the border patrol is trying to stop drug and human trafficking from China across the border is just – it makes you want to be one of those back woods libertarians who say the government is messed up and we don’t need it. No what we don’t need is bad government. We need good government and we’re not getting it up here. A lot of it’s intellectual laziness, a lot of it’s physical laziness a lot of it’s ideological belligerence.

There’s a culture of that up here in the Forest Service and in government. And it’s just people being people and making bad choices. Again, we’re trying to defend against that but our little group, The Yaak Valley Forest Council, really needs help on these matters. We’re trying to hold down and protect these 20 bears. We’re trying to hold down and protect this million acres, but some days it’s a lot harder than others.

L: Rick, can you expand on that about your local efforts? You mentioned how important it is for people to understand the land and what’s going on the land, whether they’re managers or residents. And the Yaak Valley Forest Council has really been sort of a beacon of hope for local conservation. Maybe you could just talk a little bit about that work.

R: Yeah, it’s been a really great experience working with them. We started the group I guess 20 years ago back during the Timber wars, when the perception locally and regionally and nationally was that nobody up here on the Kootenai supported Wilderness. Because there was a real active element brow beating and bullying and demonizing and polarizing the idea of Wilderness. And it’s taken us a long time to calm folks down and remind everyone that we’re all up here because we love this wild country. We could live somewhere else -- anybody up here in Lincoln County could live somewhere else.

It took a lot of work and they have to earn trust, which is not the same thing as earning agreement. But we have earned the trust of the bulk of our opposition. We’re not out to take away peoples’ guns the way we were accused of doing. We’re not out to turn this into a National Park. As we’re showing with our fight against this crazy trail, we were not out to shut down logging, as we proved by securing the region’s first stewardship projects, where bids were given priority to local loggers. And we have found volume for one dying mill after another by, again, focusing on the small diameter overstock in what’s called the “urban interface,” which admittedly up in this part is not very urban. But there is a lot of roaded country with a lot of infill of dog-hair lodgepole.

Once we lost the big plywood mill, which relied on green peelers, once Russia put it out of business by liquidating its old forests and selling it to the market at ten dollars a thousand board feet -- less than what we could do even before the asbestos issues up here -- small wood became more desirable and profitable or useable than it had been in the past. And so we’ve met our old opponents where they are and to their credit, they have met us where we are.

The local Forest Service agrees and understands we have a need for Wilderness on the Kootenai. We have a need for Wilderness on the Yaak. I mean it’s crazy that there’s not one acre in the Yaak, million-acre landmass north of the Kootenai River, east of Idaho, south of Canada, west of Lake Koocanusa. Not one acre of designated Wilderness in this most biologically diverse garden in the state. But such is the cultural resistance by the local Forest Service. I hope I live long enough to see us get a great conservation leader on the Kootenai. That would be -- I feel that we’ve paid our dues, we’ve seen the other kind for a long time. It’s just time after time.

L: So you do seem like you get a lot of retrogrades unfortunately.

R: If they’re not from Idaho, they’re from Alaska. They’re just sent here for one thing and that’s to “get the cut out.” And they don’t realize that groups like the Yaak Valley Forest Council can help them meet their resource needs at every level, not just urban interface thinning, but we can help them reduce weeds, we can help them protect grizzly bears. And they come here believing that those are not their charges also. Again, maybe it comes from D.C., I don’t know. But we’re not getting who and what we need, and we haven’t for a long time.

L: Rick, you started out as a geologist and spent a lot of time as a writer but you obviously from this conversation, you devote a lot of yourself and your soul to saving these places -- and not just locally, but you’ve been back to D.C. on numerous occasions to meet members of Congress and certainly worked on the national scale. How has that experience of being an advocate affected you? And what keeps you going?

R: How has it affected me? It’s given me a real respect for history and the long-term. You see the stories of other activists who pursued their values for decades, and you just realize that you’re a small part in a larger wonderful pantheon of people who know what they want and go after it, and try and come up with creative solutions. Just keep going.

I guess that’s the second part of your question is: how do you keep going? That’s a tough one. I think on the worst days, it’s because the only thing more intolerable than the sustained failure or the inability to get your values met would be to give up. You just -- it’s, at the end of the day, your effort is a function of a combination, a strange equation between your physical endurance and your emotional love for the value, for the subject, for the thing you’re fighting for. So you can have big endurance and a little love, or you can have no endurance and big love, or you know, best case, you can have big love and big endurance -- but that’s usually when you’re young and just starting out. And then those other two elements, well the physical endurance fades fades fades, but the love grows grows grows. So you just keep on.

Seems like limbo sometimes but, again, what alternative is there? What would it feel like to quit? I can imagine what it feels like to curl up and rest, but to quit I just can’t -- it just doesn’t seem palatable.

L: I struggle with that too.

R: I know you do. I mean you’ve pushed so hard so long, and seen so many terrible things, and had so many wonderful short-term victories and some real major long term permanent victories. It’s -- I don’t know. I like to believe that the older I get and the more I realize times governance in these matters, the more relaxed I get and try not to think in terms of burnout, but just show up and do my best each day and some days my best is real good. And some days my best is going to suck. But as long as I’m doing the best I can, time is going to sort it out and doing all you can do. I mean you really can’t ask for more than that. Just do the best you can.

L: At the end of the day, are you an optimist that we can protect wild places like the Yaak and grizzly bears and wolves?

R: Some days yeah, not every day. But some days. Some days -- I’m not going to sugar coat it like this -- this trail, this proposed trail is like it makes you paranoid. Okay, they want to get rid of grizzlies here. You look at these blog spots where these thru hikers are talking to each other about how there aren’t any grizzly bears in Glacier so you can leave your food out at camp, and these circulated social media postings about how to bring your dogs illegally onto the trail, even though the trail hasn’t even been permitted, even though the Forest Service is already advertising it as if it has. Those are tough days. Those are tough days, but one of the things that helps is having other people on your side and being active instead of just being passive and still and grousing about it. I think that makes it unbearable. So being able to do something and lobby and work, it’s not over yet. So there are good days and bad days.

L: So in terms of this Pacific Crest Trail hiker issue, you spoke earlier about sort of the intergenerational softening of attitudes about nature and wilderness and bears, and yet there seems to be also this new generation of recreationists that are a little bit -- like the mentality of some of the old corporations that we used to fight. What do you make of this?

R: Well, it’s hard to speak in generalities. Or I’m wary of speaking in generalities, because you can just -- some really fine sentiments and fine folks can fall through the cracks if I were to broad stroke characterize recreationists. Some of the most ethical people I’ve met are indeed hunters. Some of the most ethical people I’ve met are indeed tri-athletes or whatever or endurance athletes, who seek to test their brief youth and strength against the mountains, and they have a real respect and stewardship for the thing they love. But there’s the other side of the coin where the mountains are seen as a Stairmaster, and an object to be conquered and passed through as quickly as possible without a fully sense of engagement -- and that’s toxic. That’s not the spirit of Wilderness.

The spirit of wilderness is a place meet on its own terms, and to have all five of your senses, all six of your senses engaged more at a pace that’s more in tune with everything else in there. It’s not a raceway, and it’s not a linear highway with markers along the way. It’s not how far you go into the Wilderness that matters, or how fast you go through it or even that you go into it at all. It’s a lot more complicated than that. And it’s the last thing it should be viewed as, in my opinion, as a commodity of what does it have to give us. It’s easy to think that way, what does the Wilderness have to give us because it has given us so much, as Wallace Stegner and so many others have pointed out.

But it would be nice to turn the corner as a culture after 200 plus years, I think we might be a little overdue in this country. Think about what is our obligation and responsibility. What can we give back to Wilderness in exchange for what it’s given us, instead of just this grocery store shopping shelf expedition mentality, of bucket listing, and top ten place listing, and just “take take take.” I know I sound like an old person and I am or getting that way, but it’s in general, it’s a problem.

L: Well I appreciate all that you shared today and indeed share your hope that we turn this culture and find a way in ourselves to give back to wild places that have given us so much.

R: Well thanks we’ve sure got some bright spots like your and Dave’s work for bears and wolves and the whole state, the whole West. And we’ve got a handful of allies in Congress and it’s not over yet. We’ve got a few allies in Helena, it’s not over yet. We just have to keep showing up and working harder.

L: Well thank you Rick. You’re listening to the Grizzly Times and we’re here today with author and advocate Rick Bass. Thanks so much, Rick.

R: Thank you Louisa I sure appreciate it.