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In the following Blog, Louisa Willcox shares the story of Jackson Wyoming's bear matron and rock star, known only by her number - 399.

Celebrating the Quintessential Grizzly Mom on Mothers' Day

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[Louisa Willcox](#)

Photos of Mama Grizzly 399



It is impossible not to think of your Mother on Mother's Day. In the bear world, many of us have been blessed to be in the company of the quintessential Grizzly Bear Mother: Jackson Wyoming's bear matron and rock star, known only by her number in the sequence of bears captured by researchers: 399.

Yes, better bear moms may flourish in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, but humans probably do not know about them—and those bears have not graced the pages of [picture](#)

[books](#), nor have they been featured on [60 Minutes](#). Grizzly 399 holds the honor of being perhaps the most photographed, honored and celebrated grizzly in the world.

But she and her offspring are vulnerable to being shot for trophies this fall, and her hide and head mounted. (More on this later.) Perhaps she would be fixed, as in Gary Larson's famous cartoon below, with a snarling face that she rarely put on in the wild except when around male bears that could threaten her cubs—a snarl manufactured in order to make the hunter look that much more macho and tough.



Mother Bears' Child Safety Strategies

Some of us who live in this ecosystem may have been lucky enough to see male grizzlies out and about for over a month now, sniffing for the stench of decaying meat—and not just following their noses, but the flight paths of ravens, who frequently lead them to winter-killed elk or bison. To grizzlies, dead animals are vital right now, till biscuitroot, grasses and other plants come on line.

But females with cubs come out later, when there is a bit less snow, more daylight and warmth, and possibly fewer dangers. 399's emergence with her two yearlings nearly three weeks ago was both right on time, but, more importantly, something of a miracle, for 399 is 22 years old—which is ancient for a wild grizzly.

Last year, when she emerged with two newborn cubs, some likened 399 to Sarah in the Bible, who gave birth at the unimaginable age of 90. The point here is that it takes enormous fortitude, adaptability—not to mention a great deal of skill at efficiently finding food and gaining weight—to survive the frigid Yellowstone winters while giving birth and nursing newborns... [at the same time not eating, drinking or defecating.](#)

Even more miraculous, 399 gave birth to her current twins only one year after losing her previous light-faced cub called Snowy to a collision with a speeding car. Shortly after her loss, 399 went into estrus and mated with a nearby solicitous male, who fathered the cubs we see at her side today. Her reproductive tempo was astounding.

[The miraculous abilities of bears to hibernate](#) and rear their tiny cubs in difficult environments help explain why grizzly bears have for thousands of years symbolized transformation and renewal—the resurrection of life out of seeming death.

Apropos of transformation, we have seen a softening of our relationship with large carnivores, including grizzly bears, during the last half-century. Without protections offered by the Endangered Species Act (ESA), wolves and grizzlies would likely have disappeared altogether from the contiguous United States.

But, even after 40 years of protection, grizzlies still occupy [just 3% of their former range](#). Worse, bears have been relegated to ecological islands. Vulnerability to inbreeding as well as climate-driven deterioration of habitat predictably follows.

It is probably a good thing that 399 and her cubs are blissfully unaware of the risks they and their kind face.

Trouble and The Velcro Child

Government scientists may not want to admit that some passionate bear watchers have gotten to know 399's various families better than they have. Indeed, bear viewing has become something of a spectator sport. To be in the company of 399's fan club is perhaps not much different than being around fans of a particular soccer team or rock and roll band.

Some of these fans have given one of 399's cubs the nickname "Trouble" and the other the nickname "Velcro Child." Perhaps not surprisingly, the first is thought to be a male and the second female. I don't know if anyone has seen them pee, but that would clinch the sex.

Sue Ernisse, who took the lovely picture that introduces my piece, says this about a recent event involving the two cubs:

"Trouble always lags behind, picks fights with his sibling and rarely listens to 399... One Sunday the three were eating berries on a hillside. When 399 was done, she and the Velcro Child walked down two hills and crossed several channels of a creek. Trouble was still eating berries!! He then starting bawling for 399. What happened next was one of the most incredible things I've ever seen. 399 pinpointed where Trouble was and came flying across the creek channels and up the two hills, Velcro right with her. She cuffed Trouble and then comfort nursed both cubs.

He's not behaving any better this year!!"

Remind you of any human family you know?

The Hazard of Being a Grizzly without ESA Protections

The behavior of both bears reminds us that they are still children and have much to learn from mom for another year or so, when they finally leave 399's side to strike out on their own. By then, they will (hopefully) be sufficiently armed for survival with the knowledge of what food is where and when it is most palatable and nutritious.

They may also learn the hard way how dangerous many people—particularly the guys in red shirts who work for Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGF)—have become since Yellowstone grizzlies lost federal ESA protection in 2017, a process euphemistically called ‘delisting’. With typical enthusiasm for such things, Wyoming and Idaho officials are finalizing plans this month to trophy-hunt grizzlies starting in September.

As many as 24 grizzlies, including possibly 7 females, could be killed by trophy hunters in Wyoming. One grizzly will be hunted in Idaho. (Dr. David Mattson has provided some insight into this extraordinarily complex issue in [this blog](#)). And this trophy hunting will be added to what has become a shocking and unsustainable average of 50 grizzlies killed each year by humans. In fact, mortality levels are high enough to have driven the population into [a likely decline](#). Some experts think we could now be at a tipping point, when numbers begin to plunge due to the combined effects of human killing and [ongoing climate-driven dietary changes](#) that increase conflicts with humans.

WGF officials have set aside [a postage stamp “no hunt” zone](#) east of Grand Teton Park where 399 and her prolific daughter, Grizzly Number 610, spend most of their time. This set-aside is clearly a palliative to those who have objected to the planned trophy hunting. But newly-independent offspring of both 399 and 610 roam further afield than their moms, into areas that will be wide open to grizzly bear hunting. And, of course, there are all the other grizzlies trying to eke out a living in the 97% of state-managed jurisdictions outside the no-hunt zone who will be fair game.

Why Delist Grizzlies?

Although Yellowstone’s grizzlies continue to be threatened by deadly people and declines of foods linked to climate change and disease, last year the Trump administration readily gave over management authority to states that hold long-standing grudges against large carnivores.

Contrary to the best available science, wildlife managers in the Northern Rockies—all of whom depend upon revenues from sales of licenses to hunt elk and deer—persist in seeing large carnivores as economic threats. By and large, [they give no heed](#) to those who value carnivores such as bears for their beauty, for their intelligence, for the creative ways they make a living, or for the ecosystem services they deliver.

While these states could choose instead to rely increasingly on the exploding numbers of tourists seeking to view the region’s abundant wildlife, as other states have, [they continue to cling to hunters](#), whose numbers are tanking, as their financial salvation.

There should be no doubt that grizzly bear hunting is not about putting meat on anybody’s table, a legitimate use of big game meat. It is about ego gratification for hunters who are almost wholly Trump-voting white males.

From Safe to Lethal Landscapes

Trouble and The Velcro Child have learned from 399 that seeking roadside habitat is a pretty safe bet, primarily in order to avoid human-wary male bears that can eat them. But they do not know that now, after delisting, they should be as worried about humans as they are about male bears. They also do not yet know that they should fear what seem to be camera lenses, but turn out to be high-powered rifles. They have no clue either that, in the span of one short

year, they have gone from being celebrities to being targets for some Texas Safari-club-type intent on putting their heads and hides on the wall to impress his friends.

It does not matter that 399 has instilled good manners in her cubs or has taught them how to remain calm as thousands of tourists snap their pictures every year and kids express their delight in loud whispers or shrieks. For Trouble and The Velcro Child, the fact that they are a perfect gentleman and woman of the bear world will have become a liability, not an asset.

Good manners won't save these bears. They are likely to be killed simply because they step over the invisible lines of a 'no-hunt' zone. Or they could be relocated or worse just because they show up in search of berries on the properties of rich people around Jackson, who would rather have safe and manicured landscapes around their mansions than share space with large scary-looking carnivores. In fact, Trouble's older-nephew, Grizzly Number 760, was relocated and then killed precisely because he posed an inconvenience for some people hoping to find Disneyland rather than wild nature in Yellowstone.

Trouble could not know that without federal protections, grizzlies are officially not welcome along roadsides, even if they are behaving themselves. According to Wyoming Game and Fish grizzly bear manager Dan Thompson: "Habituation towards people and the roadside bear situation, it's not something that we're supportive of [sic]." In other words, roadside bears such as 399 and her cubs are officially on the State's chopping block.

For all her wisdom, 399 cannot know that the rules she had abided by—that have helped her and her cubs survive—have just been turned upside down outside the boundaries of Grand Teton and Yellowstone Parks.

A Federal Court Will Determine the Fate of 399 and Other Yellowstone Grizzlies

For now, we can celebrate the fact that Grizzly 399 and her cubs made it through winter and are still alive. And despite her age, deep in the earth 399 again created a safe, snug environment where she and her family snuggled against each other for warmth and company for the last 4 plus months.

On a sad note, 399 is reaching the end of her productive life and may have no more cubs after this. And because of the high rate of human-caused mortality of her cubs, 399, one of the best bear moms ever, has only replaced herself in the population once. Her daughter, Grizzly Number 610, is the only cub of 399's known to have produced her own cubs.

This fact underscores the dark underbelly of 399's story, which journalists have not covered for some strange reason. Many of her cubs or grandcubs have died unnecessarily, including from illegal poaching (Grizzly Number 615), conflicts with livestock (Grizzly Number 587), being run over by cars (Snowy), and basic intolerance of WGF officials—compounded by incompetence—in response to calls from rich people to get a grizzly off their land (Grizzly Number 760).

Unsustainable preexisting levels of mortality, aggravated by prospective kills made by hunters this coming year, is a major reason why so many conservation groups are fighting to restore protections for Yellowstone grizzlies. Their only recourse now resides in the Courts.

Over 800,000 people wrote letters or signed petitions urging the federal government to keep grizzly bears in this population protected and unharmed—more than 99% of submitted comments. When that did not persuade the Trump administration to change direction (no surprise there), six different lawsuits were filed last year by conservation groups who care about long-term survival of Yellowstone's grizzly bears and by Tribes who see grizzlies as relatives, teachers, and sacred beings. The cases are now in front of Montana Federal District Judge Dana Christensen.

As expected, all of the major regressives who support trophy hunting, including the NRA, Safari Club International, The Sportsmen Alliance, and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (which used to be a conservation group before Safari Club took over its leadership)—not to mention the states of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana—are in Court defending delisting and promoting a trophy hunt.

The motives of these groups and their allies are clear. Trophy hunting is not about putting meat on the table. It is a rich person's pastime. It's an opportunity for manly bonding over campfires while guzzling booze in cushy camps where you are served every meal. It's about being among the first to kill a Yellowstone grizzly bear after over 40 years of ESA protections. What a score.

A Crossroads in Grizzly Management

This issue is so complex that the increasingly strapped media has done a woefully inadequate job covering debates about delisting and hunting. (I have written about this problem before). But despite their inadequacies, one point has become clear: we are now at an interesting crossroads, caught between an ethos of magnanimity towards sentient wild beings and an ethos of violence and death manifest almost entirely by men needing to affirm their masculinity.

Mother's Day offers us all—hunters and non-hunters—an opportunity to reflect upon our own mothers and how we would want the world to be for them. Such reflections are all the more poignant for those of us who have struggled with moms who have dementia or taken on the loving task of caring for a mom in need of constant care. And for Native Americans, who have long seen grizzlies as relatives—mothers, healers, teachers—the Great Bear naturally invokes the spirit of the Mother Earth.

For those who can think a bit more broadly about our deeper, ancestral human connections with wild animals, including bears, we have to recognize that bear mothers like 399 and her daughter 610 have few options regarding where they can live, raise their young, and avoid lethal humans.

The debate over our relations with grizzly bears has taken a tragic—even weird—turn since when I first entered the fray more than 35 years ago thinking, myopically, that the government's job was an altruistic one: to protect our public lands and wildlife, whether endangered or not. Moreover, I devoutly believed that the job of citizens was to keep the government honest, fair, and working on behalf of all the public, not just a wealthy or well-connected few. But honesty, fairness and altruism seem now to be out of fashion.

Anymore, our wildlife managers are obsessively focused on little more than an ideological commitment to trophy hunting and organizational finances inextricably linked to hunting license sales. And, of course, there are the pervasive insidious influences of obscenely wealthy hunting groups, of which the Dallas Safari Club, richest of them all, is emblematic.

(Listen to [this podcast](#) [Episode 14] by former Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement officer [Sam Jojola](#) if you want to learn more about tactics deployed by Safari Club members for illegally bringing trophy animals shot in Africa back to the US —with the help of Congressmen whose campaigns they helped finance).

Now more than ever, those who care about democracy and the future of Mother Earth need to speak up on behalf of animal mothers, who like us, are challenged to raise their young in a world increasingly filled with people who are armed, afraid, and often just simply mean-spirited. On this Mother's Day, both women and men need to unite in defiance of a macho ethos that has destroyed so much that is tender, nurturing, and beautiful.

In the end, our future, as well as that of grizzlies in Yellowstone, depends upon us taking a stand against those who thrive on violence and oppression.