



WE'RE GOING ON A BEAR HUNT

Mark Johnston follows in the wake of an intrepid grizzly bear



Over Labor Day weekend in 2010, a four-year-old female grizzly bear swam a remarkable 15 miles across Flathead Lake in the northwest corner of Montana.

Although known to be capable swimmers, grizzly bears don't often come across lakes as large as Flathead in their territory. At 28 miles long and 15 miles wide, Flathead Lake is the largest, natural, freshwater lake in the Western United States. In July, the water temperature peaks at about 21°C, but

by early September, autumn's chill has already begun to set in.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Park workers captured and collared the bear in June 2010 because she was too close to a camp on the lake's western shore. They released her in a remote area five miles west of the lake. However, within two months, she had returned to the lake near the town of Rollins. Undeterred by the size and chill of the waterway that stood between her and where she wanted to go, the wily bear braved the crossing.

Starting at Painted Rock, the bear swam one mile south to Cedar Island, where she spent the night. The next day, she continued swimming southwest to Wild Horse Island where she roamed for three days. On day five, she landed at King's Point, another six miles away. She rested again and set out across the body of the lake, completing an eight-mile swim to the east shore.

Her amazing journey was discovered when the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks team retrieved the GPS-enabled collar they had fitted her with more than a year earlier and analysed its recorded data. They learned that between June 2010 and September 2011, the roaming grizzly had travelled approximately 1,200 miles in total, which included her astonishing 15-mile swim of Flathead Lake.

"She spent a minimum of eight hours in the water swimming the last section, probably closer to 12 hours if you put it all together," says Rick Mace, a research biologist with the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

CHASING THE GRIZZLY

I was fascinated by this story, and being an open water swimmer who loves Flathead Lake, I decided to retrace that intrepid grizzly's voyage across the lake. On the fourth anniversary of her swim, I set out in optimal conditions from Painted Rock on the western shore. With the help of my support crew, I was set to chase the grizzly. The water was a comfortable 18°C and the 24°C air made for a surprisingly pleasant start to the swim. I expected it to take 7.5 hours.

A kayaker guided and protected me from boat traffic and my crew — enjoying bagels and freshly brewed coffee — and rode along in an 18-foot motorboat. I envied their breakfast, as I would be eating little more than Montana huckleberry-flavoured energy gels and water every 45 minutes for the next eight hours.

I soon settled into my 'All Day Pace', which I'd developed while training for an English Channel relay a few years ago. I headed toward the first island the grizzly had visited in 2010: →

UNDETERRED BY THE SIZE AND CHILL OF THE WATERWAY, THE WILY BEAR BRAVED THE CROSSING

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← Cedar Island. This leg of the swim took only about 30 minutes, and I was right on pace. As I swam toward my next destination, I wondered whether the grizzly bear had a goal when she was swimming and whether she'd worried about her pacing during her adventure.

where he was guiding me, but I let him lead the way.

And soon, we arrived at our next checkpoint, Wild Horse Island State Park. Wild Horse Island has been an important historical landmark

for generations; half of

Flathead Lake and the

entire path of the

grizzly's crossing

lies within the

boundaries of the

Flathead

Reservation,

inhabited by the

Salish-Kootenai

Indians. They had

long used Wild

Horse Island to pasture

their horses and keep

them out of the thieving

hands of rival tribes. Trails and paths

crisscross the island and hikers often

report seeing wild horses, big horn

sheep, goats, deer and the occasional

grizzly bear. Back in 2010, the grizzly

I was chasing had spent three days on

WILD HORSE ISLAND

I stopped near Shelter Island for a feed after an hour. That's when conditions started to get more difficult. I no longer benefited from a tailwind pushing me straight south — the wind had shifted some 20° to the west. Keeping a steady swimming rhythm is difficult when the wind and waves come in at odd angles, and my support kayaker also found it difficult to stay close to me. At times, I wasn't sure

MY FEEDINGS WERE GOING WELL AND I STARTED THINKING ABOUT A POST-SWIM BEER, STILL SEVEN MILES AWAY



Oh deer!
Spectators on
Wild Horse Island

the island, possibly hunting the various animals that call the island home.

POST-SWIM BEER

About five miles into the swim, my training partner Erika Binger arrived to swim the mile and a half with me to Rocky Point. I was glad to have the company. We headed south in tandem — Erica in a wetsuit, me without. About an hour later, we arrived at Rocky Point where the bear's path switched from southerly to easterly toward Bird Island. Though it still lay five miles to the east, I could see it. The wind died down and the lake flattened into a glassy pool, flat as a tabletop, with visibility in all directions seemingly infinite.

I'd passed the halfway point but still felt strong, with only the occasional twinge in my shoulder. My feedings were going well and I started thinking about a post-swim beer, still seven miles away, but coming closer with each stroke.

I cruised to Bird Island in the flat water, enjoying the spectacular

September day and started wondering what the grizzly had thought about four years earlier. The data don't show the time she swam or what the weather conditions were, but I'm pretty sure the bear and I were probably thinking the same thing: I want to get to that island.

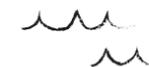
We arrived at Bird Island, 12 miles into the swim, and from there I could see the entire course including the finish at East Shore a mere three miles away. It looked so close, but the wind and waves picked up again, making that last segment more difficult. I was off pace and had to slow down, but after 8 hours and 45 minutes of swimming, we arrived at East Shore, just below Highway 35. Some cars honked at us as we got closer, and we wondered if they knew what we'd accomplished. Did anyone honk at the grizzly in 2010?

Back in the support boat, Captain Greg and my wife Dana greeted me with congratulatory hugs and Montana's finest micro-brew beer, Cold Smoke. I couldn't thank them enough for their support and encouragement. As hard as it was to swim 15 miles, it can't be very interesting to observe someone swim 15 miles.

AQUATIC TRAILBLAZER

Reflecting on what I'd just accomplished, I thought about that grizzly and what she might be doing. Grizzly bears enjoy a long life; a female's average life expectancy is 26 years with some living for 40 years, so, it's likely that the aquatic trailblazer still roams the Mission Mountains between Flathead and Swan Lakes. I wonder if she still swims or cares to swim anymore. Since she dropped the GPS collar, we probably can't find out where she is, but perhaps someday researchers will locate her through an implanted microchip and we'll learn more. In the meantime, I'll keep chasing her across Flathead Lake every September.

We've continued Chasing The Grizzly on an annual basis, and now about 10 people have joined me in the challenge. One year, we got blown out by some very strong winds, but the conditions have been consistently remarkable. The swim sets up with 4-mile, 4-mile, 4-mile and 3-mile sections so it's great as solo swim or relay.



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