



# THE LIFE OF BRIAN

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ADVENTURER BRIAN KEATING GOES TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH IN THE NAME OF CONSERVATION – AND TESTS THE LIMITS OF POSITIVE THINKING

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BY GEOFF POWTER



Axel Heiberg Island,  
Canadian Arctic

**L**URCHING THROUGH TRAFFIC on a dreary day in Calgary last August, I turned on the radio in my car, and for a few seconds I was puzzled. At first, all I heard was the scrape of wind and bits of words cut by a bad satellite phone connection. Then some rustling, a crackly suggestion—"I'm... just...going to move...a...bit...higher"—followed by a spell of breathing that seemed to drag on a long time, for a radio program. I was ready to change stations when the voice suddenly came back on, and when I heard a single chirped word—"Fantastic!"—I knew exactly what this was: Keating.

I'd been listening to Brian Keating's weekly adventure and ecology spots on CBC Radio for more than 20 years, and there was no mistaking the italics and exclamation points of one of Keating's always effervescent tales. David Gray, the host of Calgary's afternoon drive-home show, asked Keating where he was this week.

Keating explained that he was calling from a tundra ridge on the western shores of Axel Heiberg, having just completed a rare traverse of the big island in Canada's Far North. As he recounted the story of the expedition, he started picking up speed (as he is prone to do), joyous about what he'd been seeing over the past few weeks: the birds, the Arctic hare, the Peary caribou, the summer breakup of the candled lakes. As Keating bubbled on, it was easy to be convinced that this trip wasn't just an amaz-

ing trip, but perhaps the *most amazing* trip he or anyone else had ever taken.

This last day of the crossing, Keating said, had been especially remarkable. He and his three partners had been pushing hard for more than 12 hours across a glacier, and when they stepped off the ice, they'd stumbled on the carcasses of a family of muskoxen killed by wolves. "It was incredible!" Keating sparkled. He described how the muskoxen would have gone into their usual defensive circling of the wagons, and how the wolves would have picked them off one by one. "It was amazing. How often do you get to see something like that?!"

**NOT OFTEN**, unless you're Brian Keating. As head of Conservation Outreach for the Calgary Zoo, professor of anthropology at the University of Calgary, leader of eco-tours with the elite Civilized Adventures travel company, avid scuba diver, skier, hiker, paddler and pilot, Keating has probably gone to more exotic places more often than any

other Canadian. And he'll likely be travelling even more as host of a new nature show, *Going Wild with Brian Keating*, which will be running this fall on the Discovery Channel in Canada and the National Geographic Channel in the U.S.

Over the years, I've listened to Keating's CBC Radio segments with a tangle of affection and envy. The affection is simple: Keating comes across as a likeable everyman who seems to find wonder and beauty everywhere. (In Keating's world, the earthworm in last month's tale is every bit as intriguing as next week's jaguar.) Keating is also a gifted yarn-spinner, sharing his adventures with such homey warmth that people who've never laid eyes on the man say that they've known him for years.

The envy...well, that's simple too. When most of us are stuck in the city, Keating comes bouncing onto the airwaves while exploring the coral reefs off Zanzibar, or on safari in Kenya, or watching penguins on South Georgia Island, insisting, once again, that he's having the best day of his life.

I'd puzzled over Keating's magic formula for years. His resumé might not include any of the typical feathers of adventure—highest, furthest, fastest, hardest, deepest—but he is well respected in several different careers, does significant international animal and habitat preservation, keeps a marriage alive, and as the consequence or cause

of it all, always sounds like he's the happiest person on the planet. But every time I thought of picking up the phone to steal Keating's secret recipe, his radio spots told me he wouldn't be home to answer. If he wasn't on Axel Heiberg Island, he was in Antarctica (for the 15th time), on a donkey in Peru, or in Qatar, Nepal or Bhutan.

I finally sent him an e-mail, and the chatty voice message I got in reply was vintage Keating. He'd be *thrilled* to talk, he said in those italics of his, "but there's a bit of a problem." He was only home for a day, then he was heading off to the Bugaboos, where he'd be guiding heli-hikers for a week, then to the Arctic for three weeks, then back in Calgary, but only for a few days, before leaving for five weeks in Africa (his 44th time). Then, he explained, he'd be in Calgary for a short stint, though he'd be busy teaching and travelling to give several of the conservation talks that are occupying



Keating's critters: Getting friendly with brown lemurs in Madagascar. Above: An amazing ground hornbill skull in Zimbabwe.

Among king penguins on South Georgia Island.



more and more of his time. Oh, and he'd also be stuffing in a day trip to Churchill to see the polar bears. He'd finish the year, he said, by heading back to the Amazon and the Galapagos Islands.

Keating finally took a breath, then ended the message with the kind of spontaneous proposition that I later learn is typical for

to the Rockies, and with the Calgary Zoo close enough that, on a still night, they can hear the big cats roar.

Keating and I had barely said hello before he pulled me into his kitchen with an invitation that I'd hear a lot over the next few months. "You've got to see this," he said, bouncing up the stairs, "This is *great*..."

and Keating had been watching birds stealing their way in and out of the mouth and nostrils of the mask for months. After they'd gone, he'd pulled it off the wall and found the nest.

For a moment, openly awed by the beauty of the birds' engineering, Keating was uncharacteristically silent. But he was soon bubbling on about the ecosystem that runs, flies and flows through his backyard: about the habits of wrens in general, the state of the Bow River, the trees he'd rescued from urban sprawl, even the beavers that had built a home on the river within view of his window. That got him talking about some film footage he'd just shot of one of the beavers walking bipedally. "It was incredible," he said. "Even the beaver biologists didn't know they could do that!"

In person, Keating, 55, is a bit greyer than his bouncy on-air voice hints. Physically, he looks more like the birdwatcher he is than the Indiana Jones you might imagine from his resumé. Otherwise, what you hear on the radio is what you get: a sparking electron of a man, careening from topic to topic with stream-of-consciousness speed, always on the edge of a laugh, keen for every adventure, thrilled (and, it seems at times, obliged from within) to share the Wikipe-

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him: "Why don't you come with us?" he suggested happily. "You'd love it. The Galapagos are *amazing*!"

**IN THE END**, it took us months to be in the same place at the same time, and because Keating-guided trips are usually seriously expensive adventures with few open seats, that place wasn't the Galapagos. Instead, I met him at his house on the south shore of the Bow River in Calgary. It's a perfect base for a naturalist. He and his wife, Dee, a physician, are surrounded by nature, right on the water, with a view down the river

It's one of the first things you notice about Keating; he seems so naturally at ease with people. He just dives right in, even with strangers, sharing stories and opening up his life, and his energy has a centripetal pull; before long, everyone around him is as enthused as he is.

Upstairs, Keating lifted a wooden mask off the kitchen counter (a sun mask from Malawi, he explained; everything in Keating's world seems to have an exotic story). Inside the hollowed-out back was an intricate house wren's nest. The mask had been attached to the outside wall of the house,



The wildman's progress (clockwise): With Dee, in Dominica; egg-in-a-sock at a New Zealand hot springs; classic style, Selkirk Mountains, B.C.

of “We’re screwing up the planet, and you people in agriculture are part of that.”

No one in the room seemed insulted. Keating’s gift is his ability to make people feel they are a positive part of the natural world. While many well-known environmental advocates—think Brower, Suzuki, Kennedy—sometimes sound as though they’ve traded their wonder and awe for despair and condemnation, Keating remains convinced that the way to win people over is to make them excited about the planet, not to make them feel terrible.

It’s natural to wonder whether Keating’s aw-shucks enthusiasm is part of a calculated shtick, but friends and colleagues insist that, on the contrary, the public Keating is the toned-down version of the man. All had stories of physically lagging behind Keating on a trail or struggling to keep emotional pace with his enthusiasm. Eric Kuhn, an Alberta parks naturalist, says that he winces when he hears his friend say, “You’ve got to come look at this...” because it often means being dragged out to something that most people, besides



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dia of nature lore that whirrs around in his head all the time.

A few days later, I sat in on one of Keating’s lectures at the University of Calgary. He’s been teaching Introductory Primatology for 10 years, and I showed up on gorilla day. Keating seems the perfect professor for the attention-challenged generation. His lecture was a three-ring circus of slides and videos, audio clips and newspaper readings, and story after story of Keating’s own experiences with the apes, the locals, the well-known personalities of primate research, and Africa.

The kids ate it up. Students told me that Keating was the best teacher they’d ever had, that his classes were the ones they never missed. “He actually *does* the things he’s teaching,” said one. “Makes *me* want to do it.”

In Keating’s view, his job, whether at the

university or the zoo or on the radio, is simple: “If I entertain people,” he said, “they’ll listen. And if they listen, they’ll care.”

Still, the lecture was hardly just entertainment. Beneath Keating’s showman-like exterior, there’s a prepared professional who’s very intentionally slipping in his environmental message. After the hour was over, I knew a whole lot more about gorillas, Rwandan politics, Dian Fossey, poaching and deforestation than I did at the start. It wasn’t like any lecture I’d ever attended; I’d had fun, and felt like I’d even done some travelling.

Later, I followed Keating to a talk he was giving to an agricultural science and marketing association. Once again, Keating was in full bloom, dancing between stories and videos about artificial insemination of whooping cranes, a gorilla’s birth at the zoo, and a hippo sanctuary in Africa. Again, he had the crowd eating out of his hand, which was all the more impressive given that his talk had the not-very-subtle thread

Keating, find mundane. “I mean, c’mon,” Kuhn recalls, “we walked two miles for a frikkin’ sparrow?”

Peter Karsten, the former director of the Calgary Zoo, and Keating’s boss for more than 20 years, said that Keating is responsible for raising millions of conservation dollars. “Brian is the best example of the power of positive thinking I’ve ever seen,” Karsten said.

The celebrated primatologist Jane Goodall—who would certainly have the right to question any rose-coloured view of man and nature, given what she’s seen happen to her chimps in Tanzania—had only positive things to say about a man she considers her friend. “Brian has inspired thousands to share his love of nature,” she said. “I wish we could clone him.”

Keating’s wife Dee, who often gets to accompany him on his adventures (that’s definitely part of his magic formula), had a pretty clear sense of just what gene of his should be cloned: “He’s just always, genu-



Living the dream: Calling in for a CBC Radio segment by satellite phone from the Amazon River.

bilitate, dissecting roadkill, or drying out corpses on the roof.” Nancy recalled one puzzling stench that turned out to be a dead cat in a box. “I was a complete nature geek,” admitted Keating.

It didn’t occur to him until much later that he could actually make a career from his love of nature. School hadn’t been his thing (“I was bored to death and I just didn’t get it,” he remembers), so when he returned to Calgary in the mid-1970s, he worked as a machinist. Every weekend, though, he drove out to the nearby mountains and climbed a new peak—a regime he kept up for years.

It wasn’t until Keating finally enrolled in a fish and wildlife technology program at a community college that he started to see his future. This time, studying something he loved, he flourished in school. He got a B.Sc. and became an interpreter at a

inely, truly, been one of those lucky people who can somehow see the best side of everything.” She asked me whether he’d told me about his bout with cancer. I told her he hadn’t. “Other people hear a diagnosis of testicular cancer, and it changes their life,” she explained. “Brian says, ‘I’ve got another testicle; let’s go to Africa.’”

**ONE DAY AT HIS HOUSE,** I asked Keating if he’d always wanted to be doing what he does. He bounded downstairs, started fishing around in the bowels of his basement, and came back up with an old glass-and-wood diorama. A neatly typed label on the frame spelled out the contents of the box: “Skeleton of the Norway Rat, by Brian Keating.”

“My buddy and I—we were about 12 years old—wanted to start a museum together, and this was our first exhibit,” he explained. “We’d ripped down an old chicken coop and found the bones of a rat.”

He had been so excited by his discovery that he went to the American Museum of Natural History in New York and managed to finesse a meeting with one of the curators. “Can you imagine that scene?” Keating laughed. “This skinny little kid coming in with a bunch of rat bones in an egg container. Hah!” Keating spent the rest of the summer painstakingly wiring the bones together to the curator’s specifications, replacing missing ones with carved wood. It was eventually displayed in the hallway of his school.

But Keating, as he can do, had gotten

**“IT’S REALLY HARD STAYING POSITIVE SOMETIMES,” KEATING SAID. “ESPECIALLY WHEN IT COMES TO AFRICA. THERE ARE TERRIBLE THINGS GOING ON THERE, AND SOME TRULY TERRIBLE PEOPLE DOING THEM.”**

ahead of himself. I knew he was originally from Medicine Hat, Alberta. So how did he get to New York City?

When he was three, Keating explained, his sister Nancy was born deaf. At the time, schools in Canada would only teach children to sign, not speak, and Keating’s parents worried that this would isolate Nancy for the rest of her life. So when he was six, the family—including Brian, Nancy and two older brothers—moved to New York so that Nancy could attend the Lexington School for the Deaf. Keating’s parents hauled a homemade tear-drop trailer across the continent, gambling that they’d somehow find jobs once they got to New York. And that, Keating said, “was a bigger, braver adventure than anything I’ve ever done in my life. It taught me that anything is possible.”

The move, and Nancy’s deafness, seems to have played a role in Keating’s future career. “The oldest boys weren’t really around, so Brian had to learn new ways to share the world with Nancy,” said his mother, Joyce. “And really, isn’t that what he does now? Help people see the world in a different way?”

“My brother wasn’t exactly a normal kid,” John Keating told me with a laugh. “Brian was always bringing birds home to reha-

nature centre in Creston, B.C. (where he met his wife, who was also a naturalist at the time). In 1981, on a whim, he showed up at the Calgary Zoo.

Peter Karsten, then the zoo’s director, remembers their first meeting. “It took about 30 seconds after he walked through the door to know I needed to have this guy. He just had a radiant energy, and he was the perfect person to have at the zoo when we were looking at more progressive programming.”

Soon after he was hired as director of education, Keating was approached by a high-end American tour company and offered an all-expenses-paid trip to Africa as part of a mutual business opportunity: Keating’s skills and growing reputation would attract guests, and the zoo would raise funds through the trips.

Africa immediately grabbed Keating by the throat. “It’s a cornucopia of life beyond belief,” he says. He now calls it his second home. He soon collected a trove of exotic stories from Africa that led to spots on CBC’s popular national radio show *Basic Black*. This evolved into weekly appearances on CBC Radio in Calgary and Edmonton. “Brian understood, quicker than anyone I’ve ever met, that broadcasting is all about

*Continued on page 60*

## THE LIFE OF BRIAN

*Continued from page 50*

story,” explains CBC Calgary host Jeff Collins. “All you had to do was ask him, ‘What happened?’ and then just sit back.”

By the mid-1990s, the busy script of Keating’s life seemed set. A Calgary eco-travel company organized Keating’s zoo tours. He had creative control over education programs at the zoo. He had carved out a role at the zoo that was giving him the chance to log 20-plus weeks a year in the places

of his dreams. Repeated visits to the areas closest to his heart—Central Africa, especially—meant he could do more and more conservation work with longer time frames. He was getting his ecological messages out to huge audiences. He was, as Jeff Collins said with a shake of his head, “living the life most of us only dream of.”

**ANOTHER DAY**, Keating and I were walking to the zoo, bent into a bone-sawing wind. On the way, I told Keating that I hadn’t been to a zoo for years, and had a number of

friends who were not only opposed to zoos, but saw them as one of the darker corners of our relationship with nature.

“I completely get that,” Keating replied. “I never thought I’d ever work at a zoo either. I hated the idea that they caged animals. But the people who think zoos are a bad thing aren’t the people who need them. The great unwashed—and let me tell you there are a lot of them—have no clue about the importance of wild spaces. For those people, zoos are the place where a lot of them get their very first sense—sometimes their only sense—of how nature works.”

We strolled into the muggy heat of the African Savannah pavilion. “If you think about it,” he went on, “there’s another important lesson here. Zoos are a frightening hint of what our national parks are on their way to becoming: isolated pockets of animals and habitats.”

Keating brought me over to an enormous pink and grey hippo that had just begun the complicated and noisy process of lying down. “That’s Foggy. He’s about 44, probably the oldest mammal in the zoo, and people in Calgary have been coming to see him since they were little kids. That’s incredible for them.”

Incredible enough, Keating believes, that the connection inspires some of Foggy’s fans to change the way they walk in the world. “Good zoos do very important work,” he said. “They turn people’s cranks on the importance of ecological integrity, and those people in turn invest their hearts and their money in conservation.”

The Calgary Zoo is often held up as one of world’s most progressive zoos, and Keating himself has raised the funds to make many of the changes that have earned the zoo its reputation. Still, the zoo has been under fire after some widely reported incidents, most notably the deaths of 41 cownose rays in 2008. (An investigation concluded that the rays died from an improperly installed oxygenation system in their tank.)

When I asked Keating about this incident, his frustration was palpable. “Look,” he said, “a huge screw-up happened, and a disaster resulted. No question about that. But the real disaster is the story that’s no longer being told—and that’s the complete annihilation of the 20 or so species of shark on the East Coast. The reason we had the rays here was because the absence of sharks mean that the ray population is booming, almost to the point of being a plague, and

destroying the shellfish fishery.

"Having the rays here meant that we could talk about how the whole Atlantic ecosystem is out of whack, and the deaths of the rays meant that we've lost that opportunity."

This was the first time I'd seen Keating angry, and I asked him about that as we walked back to his house. "It's really hard staying positive sometimes," he said. "Especially when it comes to Africa. There are terrible things going on there, and some truly terrible people doing them." He tried for a minute to shift the conversation back to the positive—emphasizing some recent conservation victories, including his own efforts with the Wechiau Hippo Sanctuary in Ghana—but ended up expressing his fears about the growing presence of Chinese business interests across the continent. Keating said he'd been hearing stories from African friends of helicopter-borne hunters leaving hornless carcasses in areas that were previously inaccessible.

Did all this make him doubt whether his optimistic approach was working? He said that the opposite was true, that people like David Suzuki had started telling him that they too needed to soften their attitudes. That didn't mean, he added, that there wasn't a place for anger. "When I was down in Antarctica the last time," Keating recalled, "there was a Greenpeace boat chasing a Japanese whaler. If people weren't doing that kind of thing, and letting the world know what they're seeing, we'd have no idea what's actually going on. It's just not what I need to be doing."

**KEATING'S NEW TELEVISION SERIES** could be an acid test of all his assumptions about the best way to get the ecological message out there. The idea is for Keating to do on TV what he's been doing on the radio for years; he'll travel the world, capturing those *incredible* moments he always seems to stumble into.

But the world of commercial television can, of course, be quite different from public radio. One afternoon, Keating showed me a short clip from the pilot he shot while in Madagascar in the spring of 2010. In it, he whispers to the camera over his shoulder as he stalks his way along some brush on the side of a red dirt trail. He bends down suddenly, and bounces back up, brandishing a large snake writhing at the end of a stick. "Look at this!" he bubbles, adding his signature phrase, "Isn't this *amazing*?!"

The clip is intensely dramatic. Maybe too dramatic; a little too much *Crocodile Hunter* and not quite enough David Attenborough. When I mentioned that I felt the video had a bit of the tone of the late Steve Irwin's much-watched, much-criticized show, Keating smiled. "There were lots of things wrong with [Irwin's] show," he said, "but he got people thinking and caring about animals no one was bothering with before. It all helps."

Besides, he assured me, what you have to do to *sell* a TV show, and what you do once a show's on the air, can be two entirely different things. Keating has enough faith in the possibilities of reaching as many people as television can, that he left his full-time position at the zoo in January, so he'll be able to concentrate more fully on the show, his continuing guiding work, and his public speaking engagements.

**YET ANOTHER DREARY DAY** stuck in traffic. I turned on the radio, catching Keating at the beginning of his segment. He sounded as though he was talking through a woolen blanket.

"Where in the world are you?" host David Gray asked—always the best question for Keating.

"Well," began Keating, "this morning we were in Quito, Ecuador, and we hopped on a jet..."

The jet ride led to a riverboat, to a walk through the Amazonian jungle, to a lodge in a 2,000-hectare private nature reserve on the Napa River, where he was surrounded by thousands of birds as the sun set. The next day, he told the host, he was heading up into the jungle canopy, which would be *incredible*, because "this place where I'm standing right now is one of the most biologically diverse places on the planet. In fact, it holds the record for most bird species in one place, about 600..." He moved toward the close: "And one of the things that we hope to see are one, or two, or three or four of the eight species of primate that live here..."

David Gray said just what I was thinking: "Well, Brian, I saw a magpie out my bedroom window this morning. That doesn't quite compare, does it?"

I'm sure Keating would disagree, but no, it doesn't. **e**

*Geoff Powter is a contributing editor with explore. He wrote about Alberta's wild horses in our May 2010 issue.*