

THE LAST BEAR

“Tell me, old tired bear, of mem’ries faded . . .”

—Inez Rosanera de Rusconi
Ursus Major

The message on the computer screen chills me to the bone, despite the warm flicker of Christmas lights. Every evening of this vacation on the shores of California’s Monterey Bay, I have checked my email in our cozy den. Tonight, the Cyrillic scrawl brings grim news from the darkness on the opposite shore of the Pacific. The email from Kamchatka, a peninsula on the eastern edge of Russia, is agonizingly brief: “Dear friends! Vitaly Nikolaenko is dead . . . Apparently killed by a bear . . . Will be in touch when know more. . . .”

“Ah! There is nothing like a cup of hot tea on a hike,” granted Vitaly, through a cloud of geyser steam. He dropped his *poniaga*, a backpack, and filled his plastic mug with boiling water from the pulsating outflow of a small geyser. Thirty yards ahead, a young sow brown bear, ankle-deep in cinnamon mud, grazed at the edge of a steaming pool, her coat gilded by the afternoon sun cresting over the Valley of Geysers. She lifted her head and calmly gazed at the two shadows peering through the steam. After pausing momentarily, she returned her full attention to the verdant pasture.

Santa Claus incarnate—white-bearded, potbellied, radiant—Vitaly steeped a tea bag for a few minutes, popped a candy into his mouth, and took a cautious sip. He had worked in Kronotsky Zapovednik—a strictly protected area in central Kamchatka, which is now part of the Volcanoes

of Kamchatka World Heritage Site—since 1969, first as a forest warden, then as a tourist guide, and finally as a self-taught bear researcher. The 63-year-old bear expert’s study area covered approximately 200 square miles between the Uzon Caldera and the estuaries of the Tikhaia and Shumnaia Rivers. During each of 15 field seasons in the zapovednik’s southern corner, he hiked more than 600 miles—laden with audio, photo, and video equipment—documenting over 800 bear encounters and logging 900 hours of observations. An ardent photographer and videographer, Vitaly amassed more than 10,000 negatives and slides of his subjects. His human family saw less of him than did his bear one, although both were dear to his heart. He joked that it was less painful to explain his absences to his wife Tatiana, daughter Katia, and son Andrei than to abandon his bears.

By Gleb Raygorodetsky



Vitaly's annual pilgrimage to the bear Mecca would begin in early May with a census in the Valley of Geysers and nearby Uzon Caldera. Steam and mist from the hundreds of geysers, hot springs, and fumaroles shield the budding spring vegetation from the chill of the surrounding mountains. Weeks before the onset of snowmelt elsewhere, the thermal fields turn lush green with thick grass, welcoming the Kamchatka brown bears, the largest in Eurasia, as they emerge from their winter dens (see "Geyser Valley Bears," December 2003).

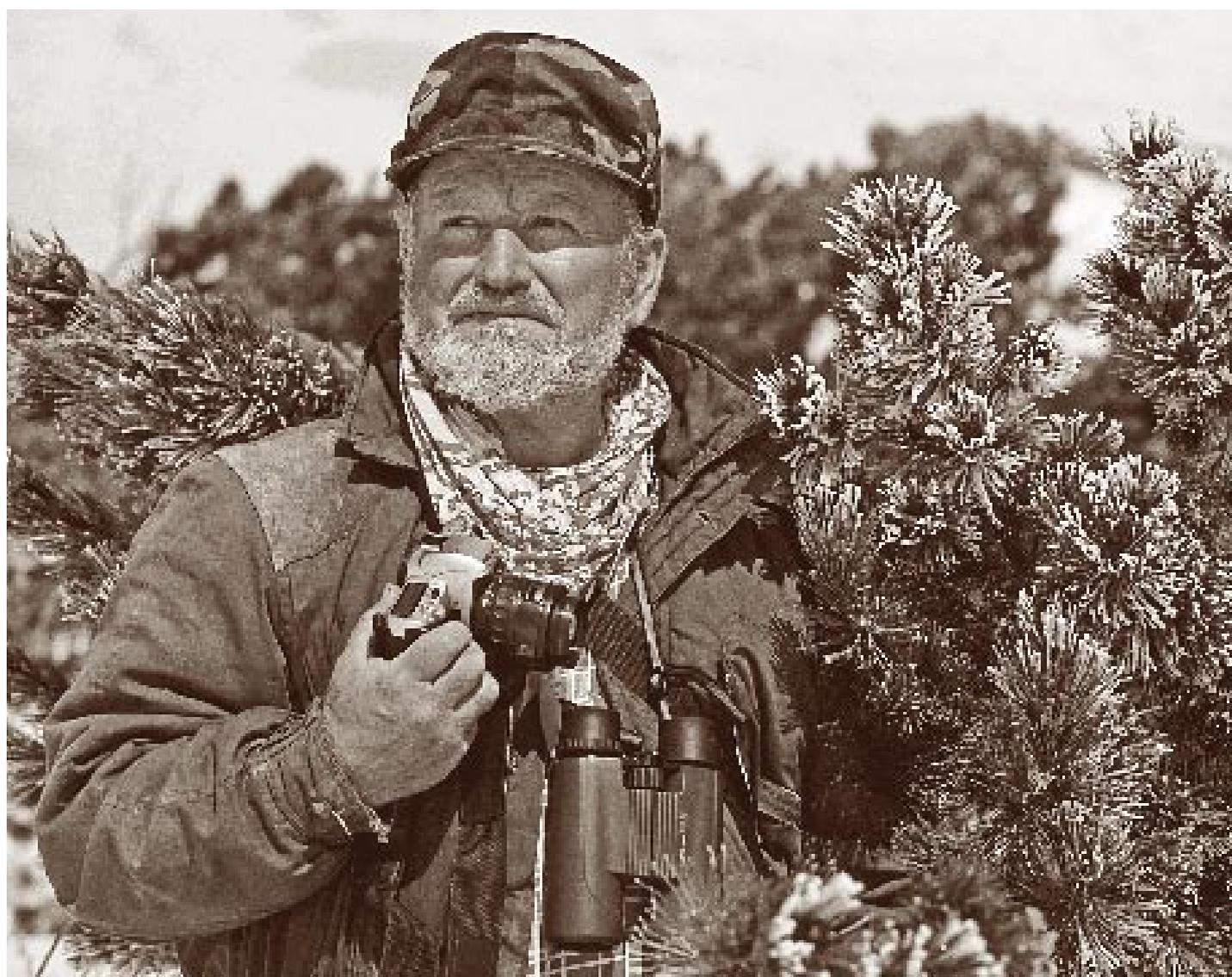
Vitaly would follow each spring census with observations of mating bears in June, and then monitor bears feeding on salmon along the Tikhaia and Shumnaia Rivers from July to September. His field season would culminate with pre-denning behavior at Orlanyi Creek from October through December, occasionally into January.

After several miles of wading through the warm, green-blue Geysernaia River and steep climbing, we arrived at Vitaly's research cabin. "I had two key bears in my life," he

said, with the reverence an aspiring student feels toward his or her precious mentors. Vitaly leafed through photographs of a large male bear. "I followed Kornoukhyi, 'a crooked ear,' around the valley for nine years. He made me a photographer."

Vitaly called them "model bears," partly because of their exemplary tolerance toward him during their many field seasons together, but also because of his method, developed through many years of trial and error, of documenting their lives. His model-based approach was to follow, from dawn to dusk, bears that learned to tolerate him. This approach provided an unrivaled opportunity to observe and record the most intimate moments of the bears' lives.

"Dobrynia, 'of good disposition,' made me a researcher," Vitaly continued, reaching for another photograph. The bear's massive head, resting on front paws tipped with white scimitar-shaped claws, filled the frame. Dobrynia gazed at the camera from under a furrowed brow, well aware of the photographer's presence but resigned to it. For 15 years, Vi-



taly followed Dobrynia along Orlanyi Creek, at the northern edge of his study area, chronicling his life through film, video footage, and notes.

“The last time we were together, Dobrynia came down the creek to catch the last few coho salmon of the year near my cabin. After fishing, he climbed up on a snow-covered bank for a snooze,” Vitaly added, eyes sparkling as he remembered that day—December 31, 1999.

Grabbing a bottle of champagne to toast the New Year, Vitaly had set up a video camera on a tripod, and, after hanging some Christmas decorations on a nearby birch, sat on a folding chair a few yards in front of the bear. Looking through the video camera, Vitaly had toasted Dobrynia and all the Kamchatka bears. Ten days later, Dobrynia waded through a foot of fresh powdery snow, away from the creek, toward a small ridge. Following his tracks, Vitaly observed, photographed, and filmed a bear in its winter den for the first time. That spring, as every year, Vitaly was back to greet Dobrynia as he emerged from the den after three

months of hibernation. It was the last time he saw the good-natured giant.

In addition to being enamored and preoccupied with his models, Vitaly was an outspoken bear advocate. In 1992, amidst the debris of the crumbling Soviet state, he visited 16 communities to inform the people that 1,500 to 2,000 Kamchatka bears were being poached each year. Many bear experts questioned Vitaly’s statistics, but his concern drew worldwide attention to the bears. And in time, his recognition as a bear expert grew not only in Kamchatka, but throughout Russia and abroad.

Vitaly founded a bear museum in Esso, a village in the heart of Kamchatka, and in the mid-1990s, he started a local environmental organization, Dobrynia, named after his favorite model. The organization’s emblem—a bear wearing a crown and holding an orb and sceptre in its paws, posed in front of a smoking volcano—adorned Vitaly’s photographs, stationary, and posters.

The next day we set off again to look for bears. “This

For 35 years, Vitaly Nikolaenko (left) worked in Kronotsky Zapovednik (below and page 41)—a strictly protected area that is now part of Russia’s Volcanoes of Kamchatka World Heritage Site—first as a forest warden, then as a tourist guide, and finally as a self-taught bear researcher.



is remarkable,” Vitaly said as he stopped to wipe off sweat from his forehead. He leaned on a ski pole and pointed to two rows of melted bear tracks leading to the top of a ridge, where a large dirty depression in the snow was visible under an alder brush. “I have never seen a bear den this close to the valley’s tourist base,” he explained, and motioned in the direction of research and tourist cabins and a helipad visible in the distance.

Maybe—and this was something to cheer about—the bear that had dug this den so close to cabins was, unlike most bears, very tolerant of people. Since losing contact with Dobrynia, who most likely died of old age, Vitaly had been searching for another model. He would have to observe this new bear’s behavior for some time before making that decision. “One can never tell how an animal is going to react, no matter how familiar or friendly it is,” he warned.

Vitaly was conscious of the need, expressed by his Russian and American colleagues, to produce a comprehensive compendium of Kamchatka bear biology. This would require analyzing the material already amassed in his archives—a small room in his two-bedroom city apartment—filled to the ceiling with shelf upon shelf of field diaries and boxes of slides, negatives, photos, and video tapes. Yet, his affinity was for the bears, not books, and he was happy

Vitaly had two key bears that he called his “model bears,” partly because of their exemplary tolerance toward him and because he followed them from dawn to dusk, recording every aspect of their lives (below). Unfortunately, the last bear, which he was hoping would become one of his model bears, attacked and killed him after Vitaly followed him into a thicket of alders.



est among the beasts in the wild, not their memories filed on the shelves.

“I probably have another three to five years of fieldwork left in me,” he said, seated back at his desk by the cabin window. Black-and-red pen in hand, he was transcribing an audiotape of observations into a field journal—his fourth that year—with a cipher of signs, abbreviations, and squiggles legible only to him. He alluded to his wavering health, the result of field travails: a leg shattered by a poacher’s bullet, a heart attack, charges from bears that did not agree with his interpretation of their “modeling contract.”

“Then, I am going to sit back and analyze the data and write it all up.” He paused, his eyes following tufts of steam rising above the valley, and smiled. “I will leave this place . . . but not just yet.”

Three years later, a helicopter scheduled to take Vitaly and other zapovednik staff home for the New Year’s holidays was delayed by a day. Leaving his packed bags in his cabin, Vitaly continued his attempts at befriending the large boar that had replaced Dobrynia as dominant male around Orlyani Creek. He followed the bear along the stream and then into an alder thicket, making observations and taking photographs. Wary of this bear, which had already bluff-charged him twice, Vitaly nevertheless took off his skis and, armed with a flare, a camera, and bear-repellent spray, followed him into the bush.

Vitaly’s body was discovered two days later. The trail ended in the middle of the thicket, where the bear had bedded down. He had rushed Vitaly, delivered two lightning blows to his head and chest, and bolted out of the brush. Vitaly’s death was instant. A wide swath of bear-repellent—an orange stripe on the snow—encircled him and the bloody camera.

I push away from the computer and step out into the starlit garden. Steam from my mug of tea melts into the cool, moist breath of Monterey Bay. I take a cautious sip and gaze skyward at the largest celestial bear, Ursa Major, as it plods through the night above the Pacific . . . westward. . . .

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Gleb Raygorodetsky also studied brown bears in Kamchatka, for WCS.

