

The Great Bear Rainforest on the remote west coast of British Columbia in Canada holds a secret treasure beyond the black and grizzly bears that feast on seasonal pink salmon. It is the home of the rarely seen, honey-coloured mooksgm'ol – the spirit bear

# Ursa Major

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*A spirit bear treads gingerly among the slippery rocks, looking for a fish supper*



*Clockwise from here: the rugged wilderness of British Columbia rising up from the Atnarko River; a black bear with his prize; grizzly bear tracks along the Atnarko; a humpback whale off Princes Royal Island; Marvin Robinson, chief spirit bear guide*



**T**HE RAIN WAS CONSTANT. It tapped out an incessant beat on the forest foliage as I stared intently through the curtain of falling water drops for any signs of activity.

All around was ancient coniferous forest, dominated by red cedar, hemlock and spruce, but within it nothing seemed to be moving. Only the occasional raucous cry of a raven broke the monotony of the rain's percussion.

An hour later, the rain had not eased, and the flow of the stream in front of us had visibly swollen. Then, in a very matter-of-fact tone, our guide Marvin Robinson suddenly but quietly announced: "There's a bear in the bushes just upstream." Everyone swung around and peered intently in the direction he'd indicated. It was very gloomy, and

distinguishing shape and form in dark recesses was tough. Then the bear stepped out into the open, and our response was a peculiar amalgamation of conflicting emotions, excitement and disappointment intertwined. It was a black bear, the first we'd seen, but it wasn't the prize that we sought. We had come to see a far more rare and much revered animal, one that the First Nation communities call the mooksgm'ol – the spirit bear – an

ursine contradiction, a white variant of the black bear.

**MARVEN ROBINSON IS 'MR SPIRIT BEAR'.** He's from the Gitga'at First Nation based in Hartley Bay at the heart of the remote wild coast of British Columbia known as the Great Bear Rainforest. Marvin, now in his forties, has spent most of his adult life amongst the bears and knows all of them individually, and his dedication and determination has effectively facilitated the potential for spirit bear watching. He built the viewing platform on

which we were standing overlooking a small stream on Gribbell Island, a prime hot spot for spirit bear watching – except for today it seemed.

The black bear was by now ambling nonchalantly along the stream's edge, picking its way over boulders as the tumbling waters boiled around. Across the width of the stream, the backs and flanks of pink salmon could be seen flashing at the surface as they battled against the increasing torrent, desperate to reach the calmer waters of the spawning beds which were only a short distance upstream.

It is, of course, this annual glut of salmon that attracts the bears, eager to fatten up before winter hibernation. By now our bear was immediately in front of the platform and was half-heartedly picking over the corpse of a dead fish: with so much food on their table they can afford to be choosy. As a live fish swam past, the bear made an immediate lunge and plunged its face into the water, emerging with a 50cm long salmon flapping in its jaws.

As our day on the platform was drawing to a close, Marvin took me to one side, out of ear-shot of other ➤

# Pipe dream though Paradise

## Oil and water won't mix in the fragile ecosystem of the Great Bear Rainforest

The waters of the Great Bear Rainforest are amongst the richest (in terms of species diversity and abundance) and most vulnerable on the planet. They are also extremely treacherous to navigate. In March 2006, the Queen of the North, a BC ferry, exited Grenville Channel near Hartley Bay (home of the Gitga'at First Nation), misjudged the turn and slammed into Gil Island. Largely thanks to the bravery and help of those from Hartley Bay, 99 of the 101 people on board survived. The wreck still lies in 400m of water and every day her fuel tanks leak more diesel into the sea. The effect of this isn't really known, but it can't be good and one day, perhaps after a bad winter storm, the fuel tanks will seriously rupture and tens of thousands of gallons may spill out in one go.

Yet a far greater threat looms – the proposed Northern Gateway project, which intends to run a pipeline from Alberta in the Canadian interior to the British Columbia coast at Kitimat. The double pipeline would carry consolidate (the liquid used to dilute thick crude oil so it can flow) east to Alberta as well as crude oil west to Kitimat. This would require a fleet of giant tankers bringing in consolidate and taking away the crude – perhaps as many as 220 per year – and they would all have to navigate through the narrow channels

of the Great Bear Rainforest. If a modest sized vessel like the Queen of the North (150m long) can't do it, what chance a supertanker twice the length?

Environmentalists insist it is a disaster that is bound to happen. With each tanker carrying in excess of 2 million barrels of crude, the effects could be unthinkable and make the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster



that occurred further north in Alaskan waters, look like just a minor sort of incident.

The immediate effects of an oil spill are obvious and well-known, thousands of pathetic, helpless birds and mammals smothered and poisoned, but the insidious long-term consequences are more difficult to define and fathom. The ecological web that weaves through the Great Bear Rainforest is so intricate and tangled, that the effects of an oil disaster bringing in consolidate would reach far beyond the immediate shores and potentially affect the economy of the whole of British Columbia.



members of the group I was leading and told me of an alternative site we could try to see spirit bears the following day. He instantly had my full attention. It was a site on the opposite side of Gribbell Island, that hadn't been developed, so there were no trails and no platform. In fact, hardly anyone ever went there, but Marven knew there were bears. It would be tough, but did we want to give it a try? For my money, tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

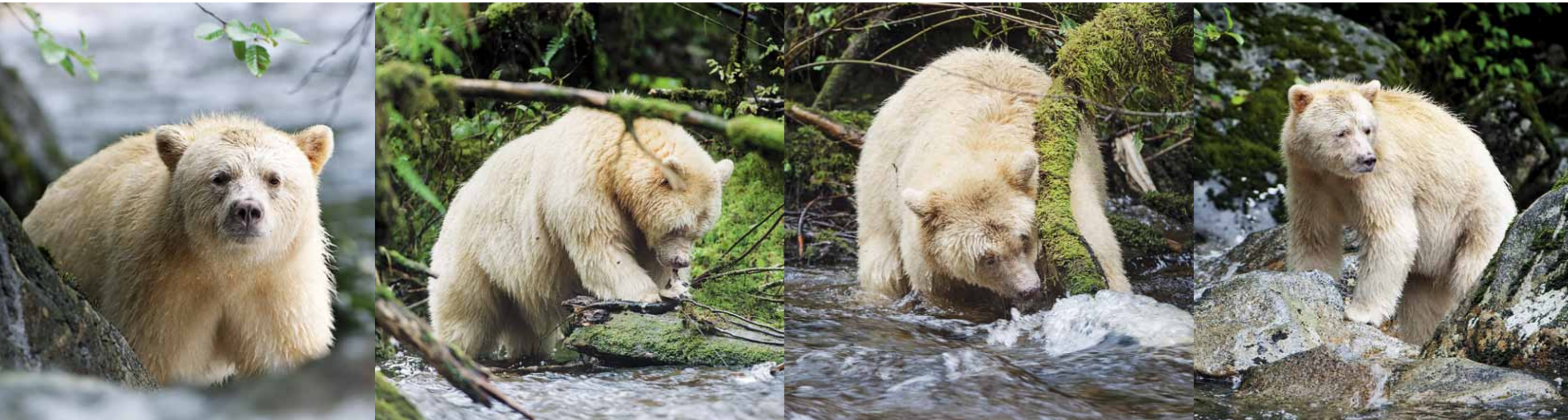
**THE TRIP HAD BEGUN A WEEK EARLIER**, when our group of 12 boarded the Island Roamer, a beautiful a 21m ketch-rigged yacht, in the sleepy coastal community of Bella Bella. Over the following days we sailed north, following a convoluted route through narrow channels and fjords, continuously surrounded by some of the most breathtaking scenery imaginable. Towering snow-capped mountains in the distance formed the backdrop to a landscape dominated by densely forested slopes and glassy waters, where ethereal mists twisted and swirled like dancing spirits.

Each day, we had stopped at a hidden bay or concealed cove to go ashore and explore the path less trodden. Even where the smallest streams ended their short journey to the sea, salmon pushed through from salt into fresh water, running the gauntlet of predators gathering to feast. When there were no bears there were always bald eagles, countless gulls and even occasional wolves.

The daily voyages between our anchoring sites were just as captivating and endlessly interesting. In the deeper channels we frequently encountered humpback whales, serenely diving

*Above: the yacht Island Roamer, one civilised way to see the wilderness and get close to its wildlife. Right: a bald eagle cannot fail to impress*





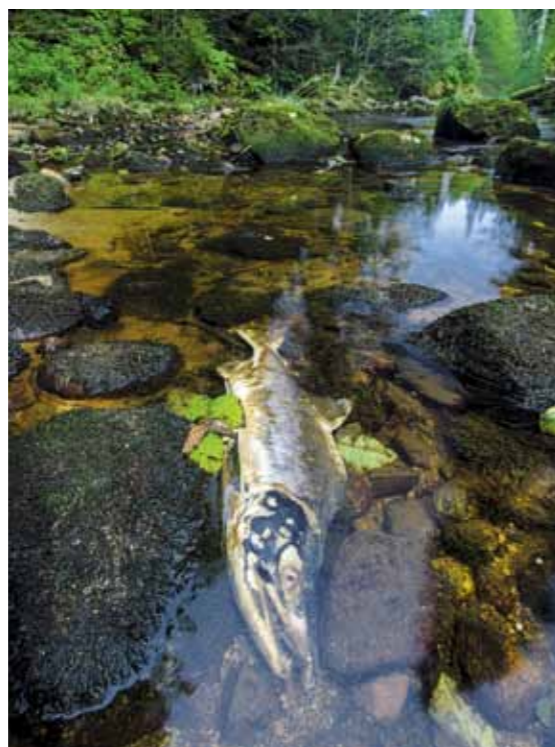
and then surfacing with a distinctive blow and plume of water vapour (if you are down wind and catch their breath it's a distinctly unpleasant whiff of fishy rotting cabbage). On two memorable occasions we came across a pod of marauding orcas, probably not 'resident' animals (that feed exclusively on salmon), but much more elusive 'transients' that range over far greater distances and specialise in hunting marine mammals. We watched a pod chase down a young Stellar's sea lion, although at a distance it was hard to see the final outcome (although we suspected it hadn't ended well for the sea lion).

Back on board Island Roamer after our day on the platform, I outlined the plan to the group for the following morning. We'd be up earlier than normal and set off to sail around the north of Gribbell Island as early as possible at the 'secret' site he had mentioned. Excited anticipation infused us all when we turned in for the night.

The following morning we found Marven waiting on his boat in a small bay. He came onboard to brief

*Below: fish are so plentiful that the choice bits are taken from a catch and the rest is discarded*

**“As a live fish swam past, the bear made an immediate lunge and plunged its face into the water, emerging with a 50cm long salmon”**



us before we then set off to the shore in the inflatables. A jumble of dark boulders covered the shore making landing tricky, even on the rising tide. But the instant we were on land it was clear this was a very special place. Enraged by more overnight rain, a large stream flowed into the sea with brutal force, yet a handful of paces away inside the ancient forest there was an eerie tranquillity.

Marven led the way up a rough animal trail, as we picked our way over fallen logs and roots wrapped in deep

cushions of damp moss. We followed the course of the stream and a fetid aroma tugged my nasal passages, a pungent cocktail of heady pine, sea saltiness and rancid decay. The corpses of countless salmon, some almost whole, others decapitated and shredded, were strewn around the forest floor. It was a macabre scene resembling the aftermath of a Biblical flood.

**WE STOPPED BY THE STREAM**

about 400m up from the shore. The waters were fast and broken as they cascaded over submerged rocks, and in places the regular banks had been breached and the dark but clear, tea-coloured water lapped around the trunks of the giant conifers. Even here there were salmon.

We waited and Marven went scouting. When the call came it was impossible to move quickly over the slippery rocks and tangle of fallen trunks and branches. Would the bear remain in view long enough?

When we caught up with him, Marven motioned for us to sit

*Below: bears are not the only predators on Gribbell Island: timber wolves rest on the shoreline*

quietly on the bank and keep our eyes on the large fallen tree that straddled the stream edge on the opposite bank. It was only 10m away and Marven insisted just behind it was a spirit bear. We waited. Then I had one of those sixth-sense moments; the sudden feeling I was being watched. As I lifted my head, I met the stare of the spirit bear across the stream. We all gasped. The bear lifted its snout and twitched its nose as it checked smells. It came

under the fallen log and walked into the stream, in front of us, intent on finding a meal.

While black bears are known from across Canada and the more wild areas of the USA, spirit bears are known only from the islands and some mainland areas centred on the Great Bear Rainforest. The phenomenon is the consequence of a recessive gene mutation (the same gene associated with red hair and fair skin in humans) and to be born white (they are actually more pale honey coloured) a bear must inherit



the mutation from both parents. But the parents themselves are not necessarily white, they just need to carry and pass on the recessive gene. What is not known is why the mutation occurs in the first place and why it is restricted to the black bears of the Great Bear Rainforest.

Our bear continued to work the stream, stepping from rock to rock, sniffing and picking at dead salmon along the edges. Every so often, it would rush through the shallows at salmon swimming upstream. More often than not the salmon escaped, but there were so many fish in the water that sooner or later the bear would trap one in its paws, grab it in its mouth and carry it to the bank. If the fish was female, the bear would simply stand on the body, ejecting a jet of red spherical eggs as if squeezing a toothpaste tube, before lapping up the bounty. If the fish was male, the bear bit off the top of the head, ate the fatty brain, then discarded the rest.

**SITTING IN THIS PRIMORDIAL FOREST**, surrounded by towering trees and watching this bear in such a relaxed, intimate way, it was easy to imagine we were witnessing an ancient scene untouched by humanity's influence. Having a minimum impact on the environment, and living in harmony with it, is central to the Gitga'at First Nation. They have held this ethos for centuries and see little need to change even when adopting modernity. This 'in harmony' philosophy runs through the core of Marven Robinson's approach to spirit bear watching. It is very earthy and there are few frills, but the experience is so much the better for it.



*Above: an orca in Mathieson Channel.*

*Below: looking for bears in Mussel Inlet*



## TRIP ADVISER

**COST RATING** ★★★★★☆

**SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:** Wildlife Worldwide offers a 12-day tour to the Great Bear Rainforest in August / September 2014 & 2015, which includes seven nights aboard the Island Roamer or its sister yacht Island Odyssey. Voyage routes vary depending on dates and conditions. September departures are the best for bears and normally begin in Prince Rupert and end in Bella Bella (or vice versa). They concentrate on areas that are good for seeing grizzly bears, black bears and spirit bears as well as plenty of whales and possibly even coastal wolves. From £4,745 including international flights to Vancouver. Single cabins are NOT available on board the yachts ([www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)).

**GETTING THERE:** The Great Bear Rainforest is remote, so access is time consuming. International flights into Vancouver then give the option to fly with Coastal Pacific Air to Bella Bella, Bella Coola or Prince Rupert, where vessels can be boarded. There are also various land-based lodges with bear viewing options. These include Knight Inlet ([www.grizzlytours.com](http://www.grizzlytours.com)) and Tweedsmuir Park Lodge ([www.tweedsmuirparklodge.com](http://www.tweedsmuirparklodge.com)) for grizzly bears and black bears, and Spirit Bear Lodge ([www.spiritbear.com](http://www.spiritbear.com)) for spirit and black bears.

**VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK:** UK citizens do not require a visa to visit Canada.

**TIPS & WARNINGS:** Be prepared for plenty of rain – wellies and good waterproof jackets and trousers are essential. Also, take one or two dry sacks for camera gear and other equipment. Temperatures in September can be cool, so pack warm clothing, too. Seas in the inshore areas are generally calm so motion sickness is not a real issue, unless you are particularly susceptible. Biting insects are not a problem.

**WHEN TO GO:** The best bear viewing – particularly spirit bears on Gribbell Island – is from the end of August until mid October, coinciding with major runs of salmon. Grizzly and black bears, which are easier to see, can be found along rivers earlier, but with less frequency.

### TOUR OPERATORS

**WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE,**

Tel: 0845 130 6982;  
[www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

**NATURAL WORLD SAFARIS,**

Tel: 01273 691 642;  
[www.naturalworldsafaris.com](http://www.naturalworldsafaris.com)

**BEAR TRAILS,**

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[www.beartrails.co.uk](http://www.beartrails.co.uk)