

THE BEAR

by Father Charles A.E. Brandt (Yde)

I had never had a bear watch me fish before, although I have watched bears fish. It happened one morning on the Campbell River in mid-July. I was in pursuit of summer-run steelhead, the run that had been introduced from the Tsitika River. These fish had been moving into the river since June and perhaps as early as May. For the past several weeks, I had been coming to the river in the early morning, and each visit had been an event of outstanding proportions. It was not unusual to beach and release three or four steelhead in a two-hour period. The experience never palled. There was always the excitement and anticipation of the first strike which jolted the creative forces and spontaneities of my inner being. The Campbell is the poor man's Dean, yet rich beyond all telling.

That morning, there was a difference in the air. I waded out comfortably across the bar to the Main Islands Pool to the riffle at its head — to the point where the bar drops off somewhat sharply toward the main pool. I had the sense that I was being observed. There were some fishery technicians working on a side channel on the west side of the Lower Islands Pool to provide additional spawning area for chinook. There was that activity. Many of us, I recall, were concerned that their

work might alter the steelhead lies in the main river. But I sensed something I couldn't quite put my finger on. It wasn't the sense of bonding I always felt when wading the bar, the bonding with the other fishers of the river — the mergansers, goldeneyes, herons and kingfishers — as well as the trees along the bank and the other



aquatic life in the river itself, but something else. This other life I always sensed was part of the sacred community of the natural world, not a collection of objects, but a community of subjects to be communed with, not primarily to be used or exploited. And the river is always a symbol of the journey that the universe is making, from its primordial flaring forth to the present terminal phase of the cenozoic.

That "Something Else" was the sense that I was being watched, yet I was the solitary fisherman on the river. When I arrived at the edge of the bar, at the head of the pool, I played out line for my first cast. My favourite rod, a Gold-N-West ten-footer with a matching sink-tip line, felt good in my hand. My fly was a #6 Orange Practitioner. Moving slowly along the edge of the bar, covering as far as possible all the water, eventually I arrived at a spot directly opposite the two dead Sitka spruce. This was the spot that Van Egan had identified for me as a most likely spot for a strike, especially when your line is hanging directly downstream some 70 feet. When the fly is hanging there, usually for a second or two, almost invariably a fish will take. And this morning, take it did, with a startling force and power that left me shaking with excite-

ment. The fish made a powerful run toward the tail of the pool where it surfaced in a great gleam of metallic light. Then back to the centre of the pool. She repeated the run, this time almost leaving the pool. I moved rapidly after her, noting that most of my backing was gone and hoping that she would not get into the fast water that emptied into the Lower Islands Pool.

When I finally gained some

control of this amazing creature — now with most of my backing returned to the reel — for some reason I glanced over my right shoulder in the direction of the far bank. There it was! Sitting motionless in the midst of the salmonberry bushes and sword fern was a massive, black animal, which had to be a black bear. It was peering directly at me, or at the fish on the end of my line. Unlike most black bear that I had encountered along the oyster or Tsolum Rivers, which usually ambled away from me at a rather fast gait at my approach, this critter sat motionless, apparently content just to observe. It had the appearance of a weathered totem, not unlike the ones that I had observed in the Citsan country.

In 1992, while fishing the Skeena below Terrace, and the Bulkley at Barrett Station, I explored and photographed the Gitsan totems at Hazelton, Kispiox, Kitwanga and Kitwancool. One of the totem crests that figures prominently is that of the Bear. I have always had a deep interest in the mythologies of the northwest coast indigenous peoples. They speak of a primordial age before the world became as it is now — a time when finite divisions between humans, animals and spirits had not yet been created, a time when humans could become animals by putting on skins, and animals could become human by taking them off. Everything was interconnected; water, earth, sky and land, by beings who could pass through and among them. All was infused and penetrated by the Great Spirit. The totem carvings keep these mythologies alive.

Usually, when fishing the

Main Islands Pool, I am able to bring a fish up onto the bar, somewhat downstream of the mid section of the pool. There, in the shallower water, I am able to tail and release it in some fifteen or twenty minutes. But today, she would not allow me to coax her onto the bar. She insisted, with more than ordinary power, that she wanted to remain in the pool.


Some forty-five minutes after the strike, when she, as well as I, was beginning to tire, she allowed herself to be drawn onto the bar. I again looked in the direction of "The Bear". It remained unmoving. A bit apprehensive of the bear's presence, I decided to move farther downstream to keep my distance, where I would finally be able to beach this remarkable fish.

Finally, the fish was lying on her side in the shallow water against the berm that separates the Lower Islands Pool from the side channel. I knelt down to release the Practitioner from the corner of her jaw. Just before I made the release, I again glanced upstream to check on the bear. It was gone! Then I heard movement behind me, something crunching toward me across the gravel. Somewhat terrified, I quickly glanced around. There, towering over me was a large figure clothed completely in black. But it was not a bear. It was George Reid, Head of Fisheries, Ministry of Environment. It was his staff that had produced this marvellous fishery in the Campbell, and the cutthroat fishery in the Oyster River.

"Do you know how long you played that fish?" he asked. I replied that I couldn't remember playing one that long. "I timed you," he said. "It took you fifty-two minutes".

Then the scales fell away. I realized that the "Black Bear" I had seen observing me from the bank was none other than George Reid in black cords and sweat shirt.

With the hook removed, the fish drifted slowly downstream for a couple of seconds, caught its balance and then, with lightning speed, returned to the deep waters of the pool.

As I left the river to make the trek back to the car, George was just ahead of me. I could hear him trudging up the steep trail. A mysterious hush descended on the forest as we climbed the steep bank to the parking lot. I still had several questions for George concerning his work with cutthroat in the Oyster but, when I arrived at the parking lot, seconds behind him, only my car was there. The spot where George usually parks was empty...and yet I had heard no car leave the lot. George was nowhere in sight. He had disappeared almost as suddenly as he had appeared along the river. As I drove back to my hermitage on the Oyster River, the thought flashed through my mind that perhaps, just perhaps, I had really seen a bear along the banks of the Campbell. The mythologies of our own first peoples came to mind; their belief that in a primordial age the divisions between humans, animals and spirits had not yet been created and beings could transform themselves from one form to another. 

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