



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION



Grizzly – Monarch of the Wilds

Long before the arrival of the Spaniards in California, probably even before humans had migrated across the Bering Strait to North America, the hills and valleys of California were inhabited by a hulking beast of remarkable power and agility. It was the undisputed monarch of the wilds. Indians later regarded it as an evil spirit possessed of supernatural powers. The white man called it “Grizzly” — *Ursus horribilis*. Dread of the grizzly bear was not without foundation. It was a huge and formidable adversary. Large specimens attained weights of well over a half ton. One swipe of a hefty paw armed with four inch claws could snap the spine of a Spanish bull. While generally wary of humans, the grizzly’s disposition was nevertheless unpredictable, and often humans found themselves at cross purposes with this disputatious animal while hunting or food gathering in the wilds.

In Las Trampas Valley, near the Foothills Park Interpretive Center, the grizzly bear once roamed in numbers. Here the local Costanoans Indians came to trap and kill the feared beast, which not only competed with them for food but whose very presence in the hills was regarded as a source of danger. The Indians dug large pits in the valley ground, over which they placed branches, brush, and leaves as camouflage. From an overhanging tree limb, they suspended an animal carcass as bait. Attracted by the scent of the bait, the ponderous grizzly fell headlong into the pit, and was quickly dispatched by a shower of Indian arrows. The Indians never hunted the grizzly in open ground where they could be charged by an outraged bear.

When the Spaniards discovered this valley and noted the bear pits, they named it Las Trampas, “The Traps.” They too, took up the hunting of Grizzlies. Don Rafael Soto was consigned by the Mexican Government to hunt bears in this territory, and he killed scores of them between 1820 and 1827. The Spaniards also employed the pit technique, often adding their own variations. Sometimes the hunter would conceal himself within the pit and shoot the unsuspecting grizzly from below at point blank range.

Alone on a quiet trail, the preserve visitor can readily imagine the days of the great grizzly, for this was its favorite habitat. It made its den in the chaparral. The oak woodlands provided plentiful harvests of acorns, an important grizzly food. While technically a carnivore, the grizzly is omnivorous and indiscriminating in its food habits, eating anything from insects to whale carcasses. Within the preserve, its fare consisted largely of acorns, grasses,



herbs, elderberries, manzanita berries, wild cherries, roots, bulbs, and any living creature it could capture. Even carrion was welcome.

It undoubtedly fished for salmon, which in early days came up San Francisquito and Los Trancos creeks to spawn in the winter.

For centuries the grizzly lived in balance, if not harmony, with the Indians. But when the Spaniards founded their ranchos here, they brought herds of cattle, horses and sheep onto these lands. Suddenly, the wily grizzly had a new and easily procured food source. In spite of campaigns waged against it, the grizzly increased in numbers, reaching a peak population about the time of the Gold Rush. But civilization was to eventually spell its doom. Prospectors, settlers, and hunters by the thousands assailed the grizzly from all fronts. Recoiling from the advancing humans, the

losing bears retreated farther and farther into the hinterlands. The total grizzly population in the state dwindled rapidly between 1849 and 1870. The last known grizzly in the Santa Cruz Mountains was killed near Ben Lomond in the mid-1880s. By the turn of the 20th century only a few individuals survived in remote areas. In 1924, what may have been the last grizzly bear to tread the wilds of California was sighted at Sequoia National Park. Then, it disappeared for all time into the wilderness.



A hump above the shoulders and long foreclaws distinguishes the grizzly bear from its smaller cousin, the American black bear (still common in the mountains of the state and familiar to campers in our national parks). Silver-tipped hair accenting a coat of yellowish-tan to dark brown fur accounts for the name “grizzly.”

*By Robert Badaracco, First Park Ranger
Edited by Kathleen Jones
Illustrated by Virginia Kolence*