NO WORD FOR WILDERNESS

Italy's Grizzlies and the Race to Save the Rarest Bears on Earth

ROGER THOMPSON

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Ashland Creek Press

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Introduction: Banff and Reno

Not far from the blue waters of Lake Louise, we descended into a small meadow. I was hiking in Banff National Park with Reno Sommerhalder, a proud native of Switzerland who is an internationally recognized bear naturalist. A thoughtful, meditative, and persistent advocate for bears around the globe, he lectures on them frequently throughout Europe and has published well-received memoirs about his life among grizzlies. I knew taking a long walk with him in the Canadian Rockies in search of bears was bound to be an adventure.

We were only an hour or so into our hike when we decided to head off-trail to seek out the bears. Ahead of us was Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park, and the backcountry between it and the more popular areas of Banff promised ideal habitat for bears. Just before we turned west toward the border of British Columbia, however, a young woman emerged from behind a ridge and walked our way. When she was only a few meters away, she hailed us.

"Hello," she said. "It's a perfect day!"

She was right. The day had started with some cold, early morning mist, but the skies had cleared, and a bright sun was shining, warming us from an autumn breeze that was flowing down from nearby peaks.

Snow had already fallen in higher elevations, and that night, it would dust our tent as well, but now, midmorning in the fullness of the rich, sunny air, it seemed like a perfect day.

The young woman who called out to us was Vladmira Lackova, an outdoor enthusiast who has worked around the world in various nature parks. She is a native of Slovakia, and her Facebook feed looks like an adventure travel website. A savvy and experienced world traveler, she has set foot in more remote places than most of us could ever hope. That day, high in an alpine meadow in the shadow of Assiniboine, she would unwittingly change my life.

Vladmira told me that bears lived in Italy, an idea I found so disorienting that I expressed not just surprise but outright skepticism. She was, however, insistent. Not only are there bears in Italy, she said, but they are brown bears. She saw my incredulity and leaned toward me, cast her eyes around as though sharing a secret, and said with a mocking fake whisper something that to my mind made her claim cross into the realm of genuine absurdity.

They live, she said, barely an hour's drive from Rome.

I looked at Reno. Vladmira looked at Reno. I searched for some sign of a joke—two Euro-somethings playing tricks on the American in the Canadian Rockies—but it never came. Instead, there was only Vladmira's final assertion.

They are, she insisted, very, very special bears.

Reno echoed the sentiment, and I realized that he, too, knew about Italy's bears. Indeed, he knew them quite well. A wilderness guide, he leads bear observation trips around the globe and has been deeply involved in European bear campaigns. He ushers adventurers to Alaska, and he is one of the few people Russian officials permit to lead trips into Kamchatka to see the remarkable bears there. If you're an American, he's your only ticket to that part of the world. He is as conversant with bear conservation issues and as knowledgeable of different bear populations as anyone on Earth, so Vladmira's story

about Italian bears was no surprise to him. He suggested it should not be to me either.

I did not know how to make sense of it. Brown bears were the stuff of remote wilderness and high mountains. How could they live so close to Rome? Yet they do, and they have for longer than any written record that exists. The history of Rome means absolutely nothing to them, and neither does their proximity to so many millions of people.

There are, of course, bears within an hour's drive of other major metropolitan areas around the world. Within an hour of Calgary or Denver you can find bears, and, if you're clever enough to know where to look, you might find them a short drive from San Francisco or LA. Certainly, not far from Seattle and Portland you can find bears aplenty. But outside of Rome seemed impossible to me. In some ways, it still does. Despite years of outdoor guiding and education, I had never heard about bears in Italy.

As it turns out, I am not alone. Anyone I have spoken to after that day in the Rockies seems as surprised as I was, and equally incredulous.

"Black bears?" many of them ask.

"No, brown bears," I say, usually following this with an anticipatory rebuttal: "I'm not joking."

Doubt is warranted, I think. We associate Italy with ancient history, Tuscan landscapes, great wine and food, astonishing art, religious and spiritual traditions, fierce pride in local customs, and any number of stereotypes about the people who now call themselves Italian Americans, but few of us conjure images of nature—at least in the sense of wilderness and the wild—when we think of Italy. The land is too old there, too saturated with human civilization, and too long developed by human industry and culture.

But brown bears persist there. Against all odds and in contradiction to what most of us think we know about human-animal interaction, they have found a way to survive in the face of one of humanity's oldest societies.

The journey to my understanding of this startling fact has been, predictably in hindsight, hardly straightforward, and this book is an attempt to try to suss it all out. My hope is that this book provides some sense of the history of the bears there while tracing in as clear a way as possible the complicated relationships between humans and animals in that part of the world. As a *forestiero*, the term some Italians use to label an outsider or even interloper, I recognize significant limitations to what I might accomplish. My ability to penetrate the richness and nuance of the Italian experience, let alone the extensive scientific work being done on behalf of the bears, is certainly worthy of some skepticism in its own right. To try to compensate, I relied throughout this project on the goodwill and genuine devotion of too many people to count. While stories shifted and changed as different people told me about their lives with the bears, it was rare that one story contradicted or undermined the truth of the incredibly complex issues surrounding conservation in Italy. Their different stories were like the various colors a prism casts, none outshining the other but each sparking from a central, crystalline truth, which is this: The bears in Italy need help.

It turns out that there is more than one population of brown bears in Italy, and understanding the distinction between the two—one the last vestige of a former time that persists against all odds and the other a great experiment in rewilding that, if successful, promises to change how we see not only Italy but all of Europe—is one of the aims of this book. To understand that distinction is to face difficult questions about the possibility for relocating "wild," large mammals in places like Europe. It is also, however, to encounter promising opportunities for reshaping natural environments all over the world. Italy provides a compelling case study that has been a millennium in the making, and there are surely few comparable experiments in beast-human cohabitation to Italy's with bears. If we can make sense of that example and if we can generalize to even the slightest

degree what Italy's bears can teach us, we will be equipped to carry out fundamental changes in how humans and animals interact and live together.

Those opportunities seem to me at a critical point. We may well be at a "now or never" moment. The stories in both central Italy, where one set of bears lives, and northern Italy, where the other set lives, are changing, and time is, by most accounts, growing short to make a difference. Yet with more discussion about Italy's bears and greater understanding of what it takes to maintain—and even rethink—wild space in a decidedly settled land, lasting change is possible. The people who have dedicated years of their lives to saving the Italian bears may finally receive the backing they need to do their work, and if so, they may finally be able to carry their wisdom from the quiet corners of rural Italy to the broader world of conservation. Theirs is a lesson that we all need to hear.

PART I: A TALE OF TWO BEARS

1

Wilderness and Italy's Alpine Bears

He claims he was minding his own business when he was attacked. Daniele Maturi says he had been foraging for mushrooms just north of the village of Pinzolo, Italy, when he spotted the bear. It was a female with two cubs, and, according to Maturi, the beast did not provide an opportunity for him to retreat. She simply attacked, knocking him to the ground and taking vicious swipes at him. She ripped at his leg and foot and pressed him into the ground with her great forepaws. Maturi tried to roll away, clawing at the ground to pull himself from the attacking animal. He was certain he was about to be killed, and as he struggled, he became more desperate to get away. He hit the bear, striking her snout, then reached out on the forest floor, trying to find rocks and branches, anything he could use as a weapon. He escaped only when the bear unexpectedly stopped her attack and returned to her cubs, trotting away into the woods and leaving him behind, bloodied and broken.

Maturi moved as quickly as he could to get out of the forest. A gash down his left leg hampered him, but when he finally emerged, he was conveyed to a hospital and treated for his wounds. The physical trauma was not as extensive as it could have been. No major organs

or arteries had been damaged, and aside from the slashing wounds from the claws, the bear had done little else to hurt him. She had not bitten him, and she had not broken any of his bones or torn flesh from his body. Despite the emotional trauma from the encounter, Maturi had been, in many respects, fortunate. A wild brown bear is capable of killing a man with a single blow to the head or neck. He walked away relatively unscathed.

The attack on Maturi in August of 2014 was from a relatively well-known bear named Daniza, who until the attack had been known as a quiet and peaceful animal. Despite her positive history, sensationalized news stories quickly filled newspapers after the attack, condemning the bear. Media flooded the area to cover the event. One report announced "Bear Attack!" Another, quoting the victim, ran the headline, "I Was Afraid I Would Die!" By July of 2015, the province of Trentino, where the attack occurred, was calling for a cull of "dangerous bears," even though the proclamation offered little guidance in how to identify and locate such bears. Taken as a whole, the stories about the attack and about bears in the area led inevitably to one idea: The only good bear is a dead bear.

At the same time, local environmental groups launched an offensive aimed at redirecting outrage over the event. Daniele Maturi became the subject of sustained personal attacks on his character. He went by the nickname "Carnera," a reference to an Italian boxer and movie star, and seemed to some too eager to be in the spotlight. Protests erupted outside his apartment, and he began receiving death threats online and through the mail when his contact information was made public. One postcard, postmarked from Bologna, punned on the scientific name for a grizzly bear, *Ursus arctos horribilis*, in order to make its point: "We wish you a year horribilis, to happen to you about as bad you can imagine so that Daniza and her children will be avenged. It was all your fault, mushroom picker with no other work. Stay at home!"

Various groups began to question Maturi's account of the attack,

in particular the idea that he simply stumbled on the bear while out looking for mushrooms and that he had fought off the bear with his bare fists. They called him a liar, referred to his nickname as evidence of his overblown sense of self-importance, and argued that no real investigation of Maturi's claims was ever made. The implication was that he simply made up the entire attack and that local officials were complicit in a cover-up.

The reason?

For many who doubted Maturi's story, it all came down to money. He was, they claimed, the employee of a ski resort whose plans for expansion were halted because Daniza was known to have cubs that were ranging in the proposed development area. With Daniza out of the way, the environmentalists argued, the ski resort could return to its plans to build more slopes and more condominiums. For them, Maturi was the boob sent to do the bidding of the developers: Demonize a bear in order to remove it from the area and thus pave the way for the resort expansion.

Daniza was part of a bear reintroduction campaign in the Alps that was controversial from the outset. Life Ursus, a program sponsored by the European Union, was an attempt to repopulate central Europe with wild brown bears. The Life Ursus team studied various possibilities for a reintroduction plan and determined that the Italian Alps provided ideal habitat for new bears and that a particular group of eastern European brown bears had the best chance to make the transition to Italy. They culled animals from a thriving population in Slovenia, where bears in some areas outnumber people, handpicking males and females who presented the best opportunity for procreation.

Slovenia has a remarkably large and diverse bear population. Some estimates put the number around 2,000 bears, so the choice to import bears from Slovenia seemed obvious. The bears are abundant and healthy there, and taking a small group of both males and females

over a period of years would likely have little effect on the remaining population. So, in 1999 and then again in 2000, the project managers, measured in their approach but optimistic in their plan, trapped ten Slovenian bears and transported them to northern Italy.

The bears' new home, the Adamello-Brenta Provincial Park, is renowned for its beauty and surprising wildness. Situated just over a mountain range from the growing city of Trento, the park boasts more than fifty lakes in an area under 500 square miles and bridges two major ranges of the Italian Alps: the Brenta Dolomites group and the granite Adamello-Presanella massif. Between the ranges runs the Sarca River. The valleys that rise up from the river are dotted with villages and ski slopes. High mountains, some reaching more than 9,000 feet, ring ancient glaciers. Streams course down from the mountains and feed verdant fields below.

The park is an extension of an area called the Dolomites, a UNESCO World Heritage site of stunning natural beauty and ancient history. Marmots screech their calls into the wind throughout the summer, and the elusive ptarmigan struts across windblown snowbanks in the winter. Marten scavenge along creeks, and chamois leap from rock to rock in scree fields and rugged canyons. Impressive castles and forts perch on hilltops, highlighting the fact that the region has witnessed tides of cultural change brought by war, trade, and shifting national and provincial boundaries. During World War I, a secret fortress was built high in the mountains, complete with countless tunnels and hidden lairs, and during World War II, the area became part of an underground network of passageways for Jews escaping the Holocaust. The local dialect reflects ongoing changes in culture and influence, with some citizens in the area speaking German, others Italian, and still others a remnant language, Ladin, whose roots are long since forgotten. The language sounds like a cross between Italian and German, but Roman vestiges suggest that a heritage from Italy's capital colors the linguistic oddity. It is as

unique to the area as Creole is to parts of Louisiana, and thousands still speak it.

Brown bears have always favored the area, so officials expected the Slovenian bears to adapt well to their new home, but Life Ursus's introduced bears thrived beyond all expectation. By 2005, dozens of cubs had been born, and the mountains were once again home to brown bears. Headlines like "The Great Bear Comeback" ran in *Der Spiegel*, Germany's equivalent to the *New York Times*, and project managers spoke openly about their hope for further expansion. They cited the fact that the bears had already ventured outside the reintroduction area, and in 2004, they noted, bears began to move into Austria. In May of 2005, a wild bear set foot in Switzerland for the first time in more than 100 years, making a grand entrance by wandering into a village where sightseers and well-wishers got startlingly close to the animal to take pictures. One Swiss paper ran the headline, "THE BEAR IS BACK!" The enthusiasm was palpable.

But it was not universal. Not everyone was thrilled with the idea of bears returning to the Alps. Opponents of the reintroduction campaign voiced skepticism that bears from another country would be able to live in Italy without disrupting human activity, and the program ignited wide debate in Italy about the significance of wildlife to cultural identity.

Despite the fact that in the second half of the twentieth century Italy led the world in the establishment of nature parks, the average Italian's experience with nature remains couched in a centuries-old preference for human settlement. The image of a pristine natural habitat hardly features in the Italian cultural imagination, even though the country witnessed a virtual explosion of park creation. Most Italians have little sense of how their country stacks up to preservation attempts across Europe and the world, highlighting the fundamental truth that Italian culture has rarely prized nature conservation.

More than one writer has pointed out that the Italian language has no word for *wilderness*. There is no direct translation of the

word—or even of the idea. Most translations derive from words for forests or woodland, but *wilderness* in the way that much of the rest of the West imagines it has no clear referent. It is not a concept that carries significant cultural currency and thus has never really needed a word. There is no strong nature writing or eco-poetry tradition in Italy, nor is there a widely recognized tradition of pastoral painting or landscape photography. In Italy there is no Thoreau equivalent any more than there is an Ansel Adams. This is not to say that there are not important practitioners or artists in those fields, but as far as an established and widely recognized tradition, Italy is stunningly silent.

This is a reflection of a pretty basic fact: Italy represents human achievement, not untouched wilderness. In a country where culture and the arts continue to receive serious consideration from many quarters of the population, very few native Italians have any desire to visit the wilderness or experience "the wild" in the way that Arctic or Alaskan or Siberian explorers might. Such a thing sounds quaintly American, or, perhaps, northern European. "Roughing it" or "sleeping under the stars" is something that people of the hinterlands do. The Italians spent a thousand years clearing the land to ensure they would never again have to struggle with the wild, and the memory of the time before, when vandals and tribal warlords raided the countryside and great beasts roamed the woods, is etched into the Italian mind. One senses its presence in the villages perched on hilltops and the massive walls surrounding many of the cities to this day. They are daily reminders of human triumph over the natural world and persistent evidence of human triumph over forest and mountain predators. Human advancement meant conquest of nature—and its wild animals.

Especially bears.

2

Italy's Ancient Bears

Italy has always had bears. At one time, the massive cave bear roamed northern parts of the country before the species died out. Other types of bears, though, persisted, and even in Roman times, bears were part of the culture. At that time, they were routinely rounded up and transported to cities where they would be dropped into coliseums to fight other animals, warriors, or criminals for the entertainment of the masses. Etchings and frescoes document the hunting and trapping of bears as well as the ritualistic slaughtering of them in front of crowds. By the Renaissance, the bears became prized quarry for noblemen on hunting excursions, and aristocrats maintained country homes (more like mini-palaces) in order to hunt and celebrate their adventures in the mountains and woods. By the turn of the twentieth century, bears had been almost entirely eliminated from the Italian peninsula.

Remnant populations of them, however, lingered in high mountain passes and hidden forest glens. Some roamed the Alps, where human settlement was thinner than in the piedmont of Italy, and the animals lived largely unmolested for most of the twentieth century.

In northern Italy, the brown bear was, at one time, a point of pride, so when the Life Ursus program first sought out places for a

bear reintroduction campaign, the region seemed like an obvious area to investigate. Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, the Italian Alps were home to a group of seventy native brown bears. There, they foraged and thrived, but as twentieth-century development inched further into the mountain valleys and up the slopes, the bears came into increasing contact with the encroaching human population. No significant problems were reported between man and beast, but still, the bears began to disappear, casualties of poaching and poisoning. By the 1990s, only three native northern brown bears were left; all others had been extirpated by human activity. The final native northern bear died in the early 2000s.

Another remnant brown bear population, though, found safe haven in central Italy, deep in the Apennine Mountains. The Apennines form the spine of Italy and stretch roughly north to south the entire length of the country. They extend southward from the Alps down along Tuscany and Umbria before descending out of Abruzzo into Campania and Calabria. There, the mountains meet the Ionian Sea in a space where the blue Adriatic sweeps around the heel of Italy and mingles with the Mediterranean in the instep of the country's geographic boot.

Bears ranged across the entire length of the Apennines for most of human history. As the human population grew and city-states thrived, though, they were eradicated from most parts of the mountains. Yet one small group of bears persisted, hidden among the crags and canyons in a largely forgotten land. Despite being hemmed in by population booms on the coasts of Italy, a single remnant of the ancient bears of the Apennines lives on, the last of their kind and the last ambassadors of an astonishing history. They live in Abruzzo, not fifty miles from Rome.

Abruzzo is home to high mountains and lush valleys, with stands of old-growth beech forests that escaped logging hidden among the foothills. In the early twentieth century, the impressive mountain

landscape attracted a nascent alpine skiing movement and brought greater public awareness of the beauty of the central Apennines, but in general, the high mountainous landscape of Abruzzo remains a footnote in a country with too many historical and cultural treasures to count. The region shimmers like a mirage at the periphery of awareness, and, even among Italians, it is ephemeral.

Abruzzo is frequently seen as a backwater of sorts. Dialects of the region have come to represent the equivalent of a hillbilly or redneck accent in the States. Foreign tourists drift to Rome, Venice, or Florence, typically ignoring Abruzzo. In fact, most tourists coming from abroad have not even heard of the region, and those who have likely know it by its wine, Montepulciano d'Abruzzo, a rustic red that has enjoyed a recent spike in popularity thanks to an aggressive marketing campaign. Those few who do make it to the area are, for the most part, other Italians, and they typically head to the Adriatic coast instead of the mountains. They flood beach resorts in Pescara and Silvi Marina in the summer, enjoying the soft surf of the Adriatic. The beaches buzz with activity throughout the day from June through August as swimmers and gawkers alike mingle along the warm waters. At night, dancers and revelers fill nightclubs and bars. Abruzzo's mountains are far from the minds of most of the beach set even though Gran Sasso, the tallest mountain of the Apennine Peninsula, is fewer than thirty miles away and in clear view of some of the more popular Adriatic beaches.

For many Abruzzese, mountains define their culture, and their history is inextricably linked to a wilderness wedged between Rome and Greece. Living in the shadows of the mountains on the western boundaries of the region and in the salty air of the Adriatic on the eastern side, their story is itself a story of the land. They conceive of themselves as deeply connected to the earth and sea, and the result is that they have for generations found a natural balance that has flown in the face of the excesses of Rome.

Apennine bears developed a remarkably peaceful relationship with the people who call the Abruzzo mountains home. While the bears in the north of Italy to this day face ongoing conflict with local mayors and local farmers, the bears in the Apennines have enjoyed generations of quiet cohabitation with their human neighbors. The coexistence of man and animal here has been one of the great secrets of the natural world, as well as one of the great mysteries in the field of conservation. No one is quite sure how Abruzzo's human-bear relationship has been so successfully maintained.

The problematic perception of bears as aggressive beasts in northern Italy, however, seems to be spreading southward toward Abruzzo. New anxiety about bears has been stoked by stories about bear maulings like Daniza's in the north, and when sensationalistic reports emblazon front pages of newspapers, few readers—let alone the writers who craft the stories— care to draw distinctions between the bears in northern Italy and those in Abruzzo.

As a result, the image of the terrible bear has taken on increasing force in Italian reportage, and Abruzzo's bears are facing unwarranted threats from people who fear their existence. The slow disappearance of local farmers and shepherds from the region has only made matters worse. As the people who were born and raised among the mountain bears of Abruzzo pass away, their special relationship with the bears dies with them. Without their stories and without their history, Abruzzo's bears begin to seem like any other fearsome bear. They start to resemble the tall-tale grizzlies of the American West or the unduly maligned Slovenian bears now living in the Italian Alps. Dangerous beasts. Bloodthirsty predators who stalk humans. They begin to look like anything other than what they truly are—which is a bear unlike any other in the world.

The Abruzzo bears are not the same bears as in the north of the country. The bear that attacked Maturi in the Italian Alps was not an Abruzzo bear, and indeed as a transplanted Slovenian bear was

one of a group of animals who are, by reputation, less likely to flee human contact and more likely to confront agitators than Italy's native bears. The Slovenian bears now living in the north of Italy seem to respond more aggressively to fear and survival, and instead of cowering to avoid conflict, they may lash out at or charge perceived threats. Though still less aggressive than the North American grizzly, they are nonetheless unafraid of a fight.

They are also ill-equipped to negotiate the complex relationship that has developed between Italians and wild animals. Raised in a land far from the place where they now live, they have hardly been embraced as an immutable fact of life in the Alps. Suspicion about their ability to live so close to people lingers even among their advocates, and without a tradition of true wilderness in the area, many people have found life with bears challenging.

And terrifying. Many people have a deep fear of wild animals of any stripe, let alone a brown bear. When stories of rampaging bears surface in the media, that primal human response wells up and is nurtured by horrific images and graphic descriptions. Bears seem inescapably dangerous.

Yet the persistence of the two types of bears in Italy suggests a different story. It suggests a story of reconciliation where the survival of wild animals and the survival of a people are inextricably linked. It suggests a story of coexistence with surprising acts of cooperation at its center. It suggests a parable whose lesson is the value of nature to human society. And ultimately, it suggests that Italy may again give us something of such lasting importance and such profound consequence that it could reshape our relationship with the natural world.

Hidden within its history and the story of its various bears, Italy has a new gift to offer the world, a concept of wilderness that is decidedly different than the idea of pure wild that dominates the cultural imagination about what constitutes wild spaces. The

No Word for Wilderness:

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Praise for *No Word for Wilderness:*

"Full of drama, adventure, tragedy, and heroes fighting against the most daunting of odds, *No Word for Wilderness* shows us what nature writing can be. While calling us to conviction regarding the plight of the Italian brown bears, it also offers mafia intrigue, a WikiLeaks scandal, and even a sports drama worthy of a Disney movie. Thompson's even, authoritative voice communicates an intensity and urgency that results in a rousing narrative about a crucial situation most of us know nothing about." —J. Scott Bryson, author of *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Ecopoetry*

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