

BRITISH COLUMBIA



A mother grizzly bear looks for salmon on the Atnarko River with her two cubs. Bear viewing on the river begins in September.



A female grizzly bear navigates a log jam on the Atnarko River in her search for salmon.



A female grizzly bear needs to be strong and agile to catch salmon. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Lazy drift waiting for forest to bear all

SUZANNE MORPHET is on the lookout for grizzlies in Canada

Pushing off from the muddy bank of the Atnarko River, our guide rows just hard enough for our raft to catch the current and begin its slow, lazy descent downriver.

We're not here for the physical thrill of running rapids, but the visceral thrill of seeing the most famous residents of British Columbia's Bella Coola Valley: *Ursus arctos horribilis* — grizzly bears.

About 60 grizzlies are thought to live in this verdant, 80km-long

valley in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest, a temperate rainforest the size of Ireland.

In early September, bears start to turn from foraging for berries, bugs, rodents and roots on the precipitously steep mountain slopes to fishing for the salmon that swim upriver each autumn to spawn.

"We have something so unique," whispers Krista, our naturalist guide from Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, which overlooks the Atnarko and offers bear-viewing "drifts" on a 2km stretch of river. "We're eye level with bears."

An hour into our drift, we have yet to see a bear, but we're confident that one or more will be just around the next bend. In the meantime, we enjoy the sweet



Naturalist and guide Ellie Lamb.

scent of stately cottonwood trees, listen to the chatter of ravens and the high-pitched whistle of Pacific wrens. We float past a dozen mergansers dozing on a log and schools of pink salmon resting in deep pools.

But there are no bears to be seen. Not one.

That afternoon we opt to look for bears on foot.

"When we see a bear, we do nothing," naturalist and hiking guide Ellie reminds us. Ellie's been called the "bear whisperer" because of the mutually trusting relationships she's developed over many years of bear observation.

"Be calm, keep your hands down. And the bear will be like, 'Yeah, give me some elbow room, I'm picking berries here'."

"That's my approach," she adds.

A five-minute drive from the lodge we follow Ellie into the forest to a spot called Kettle Pond. The ground is soft and hummocky, the remains of a glacial moraine. Ellie points out bear hair clinging to the rough bark of a Douglas fir and

piles of bear scat flecked with red berry seeds.

On a bank above the river, we come across a "day bed" — a round impression in the dirt where a bear has curled up to nap. Further along, we see something even more intriguing — a stomp trail. Deeply embedded in the mossy forest floor, stomp trails are a series of footprints made by bears deliberately stepping in the same spots over and over, generation after generation.

"All the bears from around come here and do this, leaving scent," Ellie says. "They call it the 'cowboy walk'." Nearby are rub trees, where bears stand on their hind legs and rub their backs, further marking their presence. Bear researchers have recently learnt that the more often a bear rubs a tree, the more it mates and produces offspring.

It feels like we've entered a hallowed space, something sacred. A comment Ellie made earlier now makes sense: "They build relationships, they have community, they have culture."

We end our hike beside a shady pool in the river that's crowded with salmon. But still no bears.

The next day we want to see what else this valley has to offer. Doug, another naturalist from Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, drives us to

