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From Los Vallecitos to Lost Valley

Transformation and resurrection in grizzly country

Here's where the big bear died. An afternoon's trip has brought me from my San Ysidro Mountain home to Los Vallecitos, an undulating set of hills near San Mateo Creek. An odd kind of beauty dwells in this place. Here in the northwest corner of San Diego County, Los Vallecitos is surrounded by the Southern California megalopolis that stretches from Tijuana to Los Angeles, yet isolated by sizable tracts of national forest and Marine Corps gunnery ranges. It's almost sunset now, and I-5—about ten miles to the west—is crowded with Saturday evening traffic. I can just make out the slow, eerie flow of taillights against a curving counterflow of headlights, punctuated by the strobing red warning lights that sweep up the grassy slopes toward me atop a line of high-voltage transmission towers. There is no sound except for the staccato calls of a few evening songbirds. The peaks and plateaus to the north create a scene that could easily grace a glossy Sierra Club calendar.

The mixture of human manipulation and wildness lends the place a strange aura—things are a little spooky, even. Still, the scene is nagged by memory of a grander, stranger presence it no longer possesses. The land misses its grizzly bears.

It was at Los Vallecitos, in the fading twilight of 5 August 1899, where a rancher named Henry A. Stewart delivered the final five .38-.55 caliber slugs into what turned out to be San Diego County's last recorded grizzly bear, and the largest bear ever documented in California. A historian later dubbed the animal the "Monster of San Mateo." Henry Stewart and his neighbors knew it simply as "the big bear."

It was big, all right, standing upright nine-and-a-half feet and weighing over fourteen hundred pounds. The Chief of the United States Biological Survey, C. Hart Merriam, examined the bear's remains and determined the Southern California grizzly to be a distinct subspecies, which he named *Ursus magister*. The professor's notes

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Photograph of the first Bear Flag from *Pictorial History of California* by Owen Cochran Coy.

on the animal suggest he was impressed, even awed, by the specimen. “Size of male huge,” Merriam wrote, “largest of known grizzlies, considerably larger than *californicus* of the Monterey region, and even than *horribilis*, the great buffalo-killing grizzly of the Plains.”

The big bear was one of the last of its kind; a female reputed to be its mate was the last grizzly taken in the general area, in 1908 in Orange County’s Trabuco Canyon. The species had been pursued relentlessly since Europeans first settled here. During the early part of the nineteenth century, Spanish and Mexican hunters competed with each other and challenged themselves by capturing bears alive with lariats. They then offered a spectacular show at a Pala or Santa Ysabel fiesta by chaining a bear to a bull in a corral. Many times the bear would kill several bulls in succession before, injured and fatigued, it would lose its final fight. Later settlers continued the live captures and bear-baitings of various sorts, but on the whole Americans preferred less elaborate hunts and simple, shotgun-loaded traps.

The black bear—the bear of the forest—still makes its home in the higher elevations of the Sierra Nevada. The grizzly, on the other hand, was the bear of the valleys, foothill chaparral, and woodlands. The distinct habits and ample habitats of the two bears usually kept them from direct competition north of the Tehachapis. In the open shrublands, oak woodlands, and grasslands of Southern California, however, there was room only for the grizzly bear; no record of black bears exists for the Transverse Ranges until the grizzly disappeared. Farther south, here in the Peninsular Ranges, black bears still have not gained a solid foothold, more than a century after the grizzly’s demise. The only bears you are likely to see in the Santa Anas, San Ysidros, or Cuyamacas today shimmy outside schools and state offices on the California flag.

The nineteenth-century invasion of Southern California by the rest of America made *Ursus magister’s* extirpation inevitable. The idea that people and grizzlies could coexist never seems to have come up among the new settlers. Even

the period's nature lovers were generally terrified of the grizzly and content to see it go.

Take John Charles Van Dyke, for instance. A Rutgers University art historian, he brought an esthete's sensibility to his desert wanderings in the 1880s. His writings evoked the Colorado Desert's grandeur and made him a model for a host of later desert scribes. But bring him up into the chaparral—grizzly country—and Van Dyke's narrative voice begins to tremble. Of Southern California's brush lands, grown thick a century after a Spanish governor first banned burning by indigenous people, Van Dyke wrote:

“It is not an attractive place because the only successful method of locomotion through it is on hands and knees. That method of motion is peculiar to the bear, and so for that matter is the chaparral through which you are tearing your way. It is one of the hiding places of the grizzly. . . . To avoid the chaparral (and also the bear) you would better keep on the sunny side of the spurs where the ground is more open.”

A few years after Van Dyke's words of caution, Mary Hunter Austin wrote of California in essays and stories that conveyed both love for wild things and a clear-eyed naturalism. Yet she, too, got the willies at the thought of a grizzly and expressed relief at the bear's decline. “He is not only the largest and strongest of bears, but the most ferocious,” she wrote, “so it is fortunate that nowadays he is not seen very often.”

Van Dyke and Austin had good basis for their fears. An enraged grizzly could race through the chaparral at the speed of a galloping horse; a member of Henry Stewart's hunting party described the big bear charging and parting the manzanita and scrub oak “like grass.”

Almost unbelievably strong, *magister* also had plenty of smarts. Around the world, bears keep careful track of changes in their surroundings in order to find the newest plant growth and richest food. The emergence and acumen of bears in spring provides a powerful metaphor for resurrection, a justification for hope and faith. Here in the Peninsular Ranges, grizzlies learned precisely where to look for the sweetest clover and acorns and the fattest steelhead trout, and they could easily fool other creatures. Early rancheros told of bears that lured livestock by lying in a grassy clearing and waving all four paws in the air. When a crowd of curious cattle approached closely enough, the bear would leap up and dispatch a cow or bull for a short-order lunch,

sometimes breaking the bovine's neck with one well-placed blow.

Stories, mostly true, of bears maiming and killing humans also abounded, so the general uneasiness with which *magister* was regarded is easy to grasp. One man stated that he knew personally of six men killed by grizzlies in the Temecula Mountain region in one ten-year period. An earlier pioneer reported on grizzlies in 1861 to *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*:

“I knew several gentlemen in California who had been horribly mutilated by these ferocious animals. One had the side of his face torn off; another had one of his arms ‘chawed up’ as he expressed it; a third had suffered paralysis from a bite in the spine; a fourth had received eighteen wounds in a fight with one bear; and I knew of various cases in which men had been otherwise crippled for life or killed on the spot.”

What really got the bears in trouble, though, was what they held in common with people. They were fond of many of the same places we enjoy. Grizzlies scavenged beaches frequently and went for an occasional swim in the surf. They lounged in inland water holes and hot springs. When white settlers arrived, bears developed a taste for beef, pork, and honey (the big bear of Los Vallecitos had pilfered a number of beehives on farms near Fallbrook), thus incurring the wrath of those farmers and ranchers who had intended their products for other customers. In the end, the grizzlies' downfall was that their ecological niche overlapped with ours too much. One smart, strong, fun-loving omnivore had to go, and it wasn't going to be human.

The idea that Southern California bears had a lot in common with people is an old one. The original people of the region identified the bear as the animal most closely related to humans. The relationship was symbiotic: the wisest people paid attention to where bears were gathering in greatest numbers, and bears were most likely to gather in places where people's burning of the land had cultivated the most nutritious acorns and attracted the largest crowds of prey for bears. There were confrontations, to be sure, and Indians and bears sometimes had to fight to the death, but bears were often addressed as “Great-grandfather,” with all the respect and kinship that term carries.

Because bears were the animals most closely related to humans, the most powerful men—those who could transform themselves into other creatures—often became bears.



Drawing from *The Historie of Four-Footed Beastes: Describing the True and Lively Figure of Every of Every Beast* by Edward Topsell.

The historical accounts describing men who could change into bears are delivered in a straightforward, honest style. The authors don't say, "He seemed to change into a bear," or "Everyone believed the man could transform himself into a grizzly bear." They tend to leave it at, "He became a bear." I take the narrators at their word and their stories at face value. The stories are not metaphors but articulations of deep, longstanding, complex relationships with another species.

Bear-people (some women made the transformation, too) had many reasons for changing into bears. They might have wanted to gain an advantage in a hunt, travel more rapidly from place to place, or punish a criminal as only a bear could. Some bear-men transformed in order to entertain their family and friends. One nineteenth-century Cupéño man changed into a bear in order to frighten people at ceremonies. He also killed calves at local ranches while in the form of a bear.

Bear-men survived into the twentieth century, longer than the bears themselves. In the oral history *Yumáyk*

Yumáyk Long Ago, published in 1995, the Luiseño elder Virginia Calac Hyde tells of a time when she was cured of a serious illness by a doctor, now deceased, who became a bear and removed several small stones from her body.

The anthropologist Edward W. Gifford described a Mountain Cahuilla man from San Ignacio near Warner Springs named Juan de la Cruz Norte who transformed himself into a bear a few times around 1920.

"Juan is clubfooted and of heavy build. It would not take a very vivid imagination to see the likeness of a bear in him. Indian school girls have often joked about his clubfeet and bear-like appearance. A couple of years ago Juan appeared as a bear to two girls at Pala, who were among the number who formerly amused themselves at his expense. On this occasion there was a fiesta in progress, to which most of the Pala people had gone. The two young women remained at home. Juan came by on horseback and saw the two girls sitting in a house with the door open. He had been drinking and was

probably in a bad humor. At any rate he decided to have revenge for the previous injuries to his feelings. He rode up to the house, dismounted and stood in the doorway. He reminded the girls that they had twitted him about his feet and his bear-like appearance and that now he was really going to become a bear. The girls were very much frightened. He started to sing, raising and lowering his arms at the same time. His arms were flexed as he raised and lowered them from the shoulders. The terrified girls saw the hair appear on his body and the claws grow on his hands. His horse, which he held by the reins, snorted in terror, jerked on the reins, and finally pulled Juan out of the doorway, thus breaking the spell.

“On another occasion, it is related, Juan and his brother quarreled while drunk. The brother said that he did not believe Juan could become a bear as he claimed. Juan accepted the challenge and the brother barely escaped from the house.”

Gifford noted that several times white people asked Norte to change into a bear, but he always asked too high a price for the job, which was risky and could prove fatal.

Not only was the transformation itself dangerous, but bear-men also faced all the hazards routinely presented to grizzlies. Fortunately, the power of alteration was sometimes accompanied by that of resurrection. Gifford tells of a Temecula man who, while in the form of a bear, was caught by cowboys, roped, and flayed. When the cowboys left, the man was able to rise from the carcass and return home. Such things were possible among people who, while respecting and fearing grizzlies, knew the animals as close relatives and associated them with powerful change, renewal, and resurrection.

There are those who suggest seriously that grizzlies should be resurrected—reintroduced, that is—today in Southern California. Dave Foreman, Howie Wolke, and Rick Bass are among the writers who have proposed reestablishing viable grizzly populations in the region. Foreman and Wolke single out Santa Barbara’s chaparral-covered Los Padres National Forest as particularly fine grizzly habitat. The California Chaparral Institute has proposed a Grizzly National Monument—absent actual grizzlies—centered on Trabuco Canyon and Los Vallecitos. One problem with these proposals is that today’s thick, old-growth chaparral memorializes the grizzly’s last stronghold, not its prime habitat. The grizzly may have had a preference for denning in dense chaparral, but when it thrived over the last ten

thousand years in what is now called Southern California, it thrived largely by foraging in grasslands, open shrublands, and oak woodlands that were maintained by frequent fires set by indigenous people. Later, bears took refuge in the chaparral, and when they finally disappeared, it was in a changed landscape: new arrivals altered the vegetation by excluding fire and the intimate connections it enabled, and they saw the bears only as fearsome, oversized varmints.

In 1986, Steve Sorenson wrote an article for the *San Diego Reader* entitled “Bring Back the Grizzly: A Modest Proposal.” Like Jonathan Swift, whose satiric “Modest Proposal” for Irish social reform hinged on selling poor children for meat, Sorenson mixed irony with accurate pictures of his society’s general lack of humility.

“We are the broken link in the food chain, and even though life goes on without us, we feel this strange, unnatural distance between ourselves and other living things, as though the animals stopped talking to us when we put ourselves above them. The grizzly bear was the one animal that kept us in our place, and it can put us there again.

“... We may feel safer for having eliminated the grizzly from this land, but we are greater fools for it. We go about our lives seeking wealth, security, and good health, as though these things could save us from our fate... We need the grizzly bear. We miss him. We long for the sight of him lumbering down our streets, powered by the flesh of humanity, foraging through the sun roofs of cars caught in the rush-hour traffic, loitering with the transients in Balboa Park, sunning himself in the middle of I-5 if he wants to...”

It may be that any species restoration proposal runs the risk of focusing on the wrong species in the equation if it doesn’t focus on people. Perhaps a particular sort of human relationship with grizzly bears must be restored before the bears themselves can come back. It is true that, although C. Hart Merriam divided bears into more than ninety species in the early 1900s, today zoologists tend to classify all brown bears together as one inclusive species—*Ursus arctos*—discounting Merriam’s finer divisions such as *Ursus magister* as regionalized subspecies of *arctos* or perhaps even as incorrect interpretations of individual genetic variation. I wonder, though. Maybe Merriam was right to distinguish a species of grizzly uniquely adapted to Southern California and the indigenous people of the region. Understated, even nondescript at first glance, the region’s scrub, woodlands,



“Thieving California Grizzlies in a Wheat Field” from *This Was California* by Albert Sheldon Pennoyer.

and meadows reveal their riches grudgingly, sometimes only when prodded with fire, a difficult tool to deploy in an incessantly urbanized region.

Many years ago I corresponded briefly with a Montanan who was coordinating a bear-conservation group called the Grizzly Bear Task Force. I asked him what he thought of the idea of bringing grizzlies back to San Diego County. He gently replied that he was afraid that the Cleveland National Forest might be too small and too close to Los Angeles and San Diego for the comfort of either bears or people, and that reintroduction of grizzlies would most likely be politically unworkable. It may also be ecologically unworkable. *Magister* bears could only have found the protein needed to grow as large and powerful as they did by matching their schemes and strategies to their surroundings as no *arctos* from Montana or the Yukon could, at least without first establishing and sustaining a relationship with people who could best tend the land.

So there may be a fundamental error in any plan to move grizzly bears to Southern California from any other place.

Instead we could look for signs that *magister* still lives here, and encourage it to thrive. Indigenous bear dancers still perform their ceremonies at tribal events throughout the region, and bears and people may yet be able to meet in liminal (and real) places. Where the land and people are prepared—biophysically, intellectually, and spiritually—the bears will appear.

For example, a friend who grew up on Los Coyotes Indian Reservation tells me of a man she knew not long ago. “This man would always wear five or six coats and three or four pairs of pants,” she says.

“He never took those clothes off. Even in the summer heat he’d wear all those clothes, and he’d sweat like crazy. People said he was an animal and those coats were his skins. Sometimes my friends and I would walk down the road to the store at Warner Springs. When we left the mountain, this man would be up there, but when we got to the store, he’d be there waiting for us. People said that was because he had changed into an animal and took an animal trail down the mountain a lot faster than we could walk down the road. That was weird.”

Like seedlings pushing through a split in a smooth city sidewalk, pieces of the old influence still surface.

In another story, a Cupeño tale tells of events in Lost Valley, a remote basin near the point where the San Ysidros plunge down their steep escarpment to the desert. Once a grizzly was killed and skinned here by a great hero named Kisil-piwic. Manuela Griffith told part of the story this way in 1925:

“Kisil-piwic set out long rows of stone traps to catch wood rats which he brought to his mother. After several days he always found his traps empty and he asked his mother what was robbing them. She said it was probably *isil* (coyote) but when he drew a picture of the tracks he found at the traps she told him it was a bear (*hunwut*). She told kisil-piwic to beware for the bear was very dangerous. Instead he hid and waited for the bear, and after a long hard fight killed it with his club. So he told his mother he had killed something with long curved claws, and she said that it must be a bear. ‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘and I am going out to bring it in.’ He carried the huge animal in on his back and skinned it . . . Then he sewed up the skin and blew into it till it was full, and the bear came to life . . . Kisil-piwic played with the bear as though it were a puppy.”

After resurrecting the bear with his own breath, Kisil-piwic fought a large group of his enemies with his bear at his side. “The bear killed very many and they all fled,” and Kisil-piwic regained his home village of Kupa.

The skin of an *Ursus magister*, that of the Los Vallecitos bear’s reputed Orange County mate, was sent to the Smithsonian Institution in 1908. In 1975, historian Jim Sleeper wrote to the Smithsonian to inquire about the skin. When

a curator replied, “Mr. John Mills of our Division of Mammals could not find it in our collection,” Sleeper concluded that the little that had remained of Southern California’s grizzly had at last disappeared. “Sadly we are left with nothing,” he wrote, “but a few old newspaper clippings, a handful of myths and a few fading memories.”

A few years ago I called the Smithsonian to see if perhaps they had run across that grizzly skin. I talked to a curator named Bob Hoffman, who checked the records and called me back the next day. It turns out that, true to the grizzly’s historic ties to change and resurrection, the skin resurfaced when the mammal collection was relocated to a new facility. “That skin is in our inventory now,” Hoffman told me. “It must have been found during the move.” He added that the specimen is available for study by anyone with a “legitimate professional interest.”

I thought of the lonely hillside at Los Vallecitos where Henry Stewart killed his bear, and then I thought of the story of Kisil-piwic. I thought of how, sometimes, when I hike the San Ysidros, I can look down into Lost Valley, way down through the pines and under the oaks into a park-like expanse of grass, and imagine a young man dancing and playing with a grizzly. I wondered if, someday soon, someone might be able to bring the *Ursus magister* skin home from the Smithsonian, and if anyone might know how to sew it up tight and breathe the life back into that bear. **B**

Note

All images courtesy of the Bancroft Library.



Pomo bear doctor's suit from *Pomo Bear Doctors* by Samuel A. Barrett.



1846-1896

C.C. Vivian.

California's Jubilee
MONTEREY- JULY 4 to 7
SEMI-CENTENNIAL-CELEBRATION

Poster by Calthea Campbell Vivian.