

STEVE WILLIAMSON PHOTOGRAPHY



2015 - THE YEAR OF THE KHUTZ!

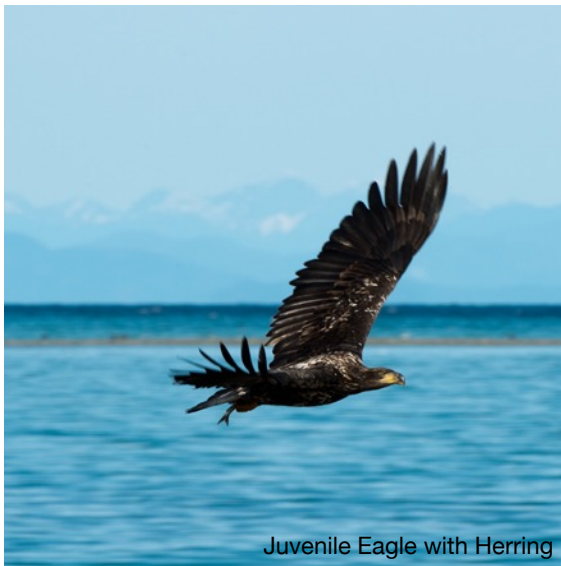
In 2015 I once again completed many thousands of miles by air, sea & road - but the people that I met, the things that I learned and the things that I saw made it all well worth it. I spent a large part of the year in the Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Sanctuary - a truly special place, as well as visiting several other favourite old haunts and a couple of new ones too.

The year got off to a noisy start when I came across some California sea-lions in the fog just off a beach here on Vancouver Island. These winter visitors were certainly at home hauled out on the floating boat moorings and very noisy as they barked at each other too. Check out the post <http://stevewphotography.ca/2015/02/lions-in-the-mist/> if you want to have a listen to them.

Early March saw the annual herring spawn hit the BC coast - one of the biggest, if not 'the' biggest this century here off the Comox Valley. This annual natural event always brings an influx of birds, seals and sea-lions. The number of eagles here swell substantially as the migratory birds pay a brief visit to their resident cousins before continuing to follow the herring spawn north.



California Sea Lion



Juvenile Eagle with Herring

I spent a lot of time with friends Dan & Sandy of [Sunchaser Charters](#) in the Khutzeymateen this year and my first visit was in late May. One thing I noticed being in there so early in the spring season was how on several of the points of land male and female grizzlies were hanging out together in pairs, almost like couples. This seemed unusual and not a normal behaviour I've observed before. (But this wouldn't last...).

On one occasion from a long way off I spotted some movement on a distant beach and at first we thought it was a cub down on the shore. To my total surprise, closer inspection revealed that it was a wolf. We followed her along the shore for some way and although she looked at us several times, she was accepting of our presence. She was still shedding her long winter guard hairs and coat, so looked a little patchy in places, but we didn't care about that, it was just great to see her. (See page 3).

The Khutzeymateen Grizzly Bear Conservancy and Sanctuary is truly a special place that needs lots of care and protection from government and corporations alike. I only learned this year that towards the end of 2013 it came to light that BC Government sponsored LNG pipeline builders conducted illegal survey work in this conservancy - looking for the shortest route to the coast. Of course if this work was allowed to continue it would see the destruction of much of the first growth trees and habitat as well as result in a major disturbance to the area and it's wildlife. As well as a pipeline, we would also see an inspection road scythed through the area too.

Fortunately, thanks to the quick thinking and action of the amazing people that work in and protect this special place, along with the support of a highly respected BC biologist, objections were lodged. One pipeline company claimed to have pulled out from the plan straight away, whilst another has agreed to divert it's pipeline and use a sub-surface pipeline along parts of the coast instead. So for now, the place, which was endorsed and opened by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, seems safe once again. But many of us continue to guard it with a jealous passion and a sharp eye on the BC Government.

***"I hope people
will appreciate
the value of this
great sanctuary"***

- HRH THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH



Female Coastal Wolf

June saw me back home and I again took a group out on a grizzly bear photo tour in to Knight Inlet and we had a pretty good day. Although the winds were a little tough on occasion we still managed to have some great encounters with several bears, including the twins we saw weaned last year, back once again and still hanging out together.

By the end of June I was back in the Khutzeymateen, this time for a week and it was amazing to see how the dynamics of the whole place had changed. Now a new dominant male had arrived in the area and the 'pairs' of bears were nowhere to be seen anymore.

The bears kept a low profile when he was out and about and there were stories of a big fight witnessed between this guy and another big male in the area. Now the mums with cubs had shown up too and it was nice to see a bear I'd seen over the past three years as a sub-adult show up

with her first cub. She was tolerant of the boat and didn't seem to mind us watching them feeding on clams (see 'Thanks Mum' below) and even sat and nursed for a while in front of us too.

It was also great to see the 'Queen' of the Khutzeymateen back with two new cubs again this year. Her previous two cubs, weaned last year, had of course returned to the area which they knew well and were hanging out in the exact spot mum had raised them. So when she got back with her new pair of cubs she sternly and firmly had to send them on their way again. We saw them shortly afterwards with a couple of sore looking wounds on their sides - tough love!

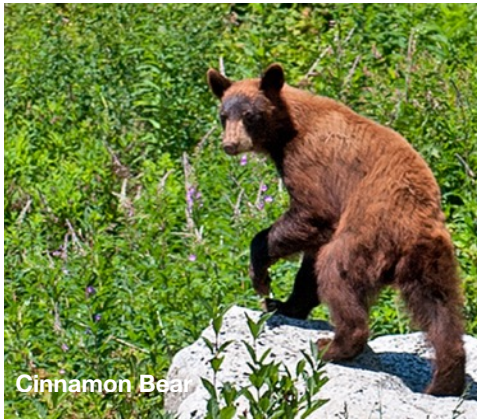
One concern that I observed whilst in the Khutzeymateen this time was that no new cubs or yearling cubs from 2014 returned this year. I'll be keeping a close eye on this in 2016 and really hope 2015's cubs show up again.



Queen of the Khutzeymateen & cub

I had several good days in there in June, but one particular encounter I'll save for another time/medium and will leave out for now. Finally for this visit, as we prepared to leave on July 1st, we went out on deck of the sailboat we had been staying on to find a humpback whale. It was as if he had come down the inlet to wish us well as we left, but really he was just looking to feed and as soon as the boat moved he was straight in to the same spot - lots of little fish may well have been sheltering under the boat.

The journey home was eventful too and just outside of Smithers I spotted an osprey nest and stopped to watch the comings and goings as the adult birds brought freshly caught fish home for the eager and forever calling chick that sat in the nest.



On another occasion I had just pulled away from a large glacial carved scenic spot I like to stop at, when a lone female [mountain sheep](#) came wandering out from the bush towards the road. I hadn't expected to see a mountain sheep in this location and on her own too. Further on, on another mountain road I spotted a golden looking black bear running away from the road and up the adjacent hillside. Known as a cinnamon bear, this bear had some beautiful markings and colouration - it was a treat to see it.

After the cinnamon bear, I was home again on Vancouver Island the next day for a brief visit spent preparing for and attending the three summer shows I regularly do throughout July. This was followed early in August with a Marine Photo tour and a very good day out on a boat chartered from my friends at [Discovery Marine Safaris](#). We had a great bunch on board who enjoyed some special encounters with orca and humpback whales and were 'mugged' when a large male orca surprised us all and surfaced and swam along the side of the boat. It is hoped we will be able to do another photo tour again in early August 2016 and if so, dates will be announced on the blog and the [Marine Photo Tour](#) page when known.

After the marine tour I was quickly out on the road again and heading back to northern British Columbia. Around 0600 one foggy morning I was heading along a particular northern road when I spotted something small and black through the mist next to one of the many cow parsley bushes. But then I thought to myself, 'wait, the bush is moving!' I quickly stopped the car and waited and sure enough the white bush turned out to be a beautiful [white spirit bear mum](#) with two little black cubs. Wow, what a special encounter to start my trip with. Despite the poor light and visibility I managed to get a couple of misty shots for the record and just enjoyed being with them for those brief few moments.



I headed on to a river where I've spent many days and hours, waiting for and watching bears. I met up with several good friends who were doing the same. But this year, more than any other, the bear sightings were very few and far between and concerns for the bears in this area are very real.



A couple of weeks later and I found myself once again in the Kluzeymateen, my first time during a salmon run. I was surprised how much the bears had changed now - really filling out after gorging on salmon. Fewer bears around, but the encounters we had with those we saw were pretty special. It was great to see a bear that I know really well and see how completely different she looked compared to the spring. (See Blog entry - [Looking Good on Salmon Part 2](#)) Likewise, another bear that had weaned her cub in the spring was looking really good and hopefully she will be back next spring with new cubs in tow once again.

I headed across northern BC and after a few grizzly and black bear encounters headed over towards Jasper National Park in Alberta again. At the third attempt and after getting snowed out last year, I finally found a moose, (in fact 3) at moose lake. There was a mum and calf that were not too concerned by a few of us watching from the nearby shore of the lake and mum brought her new little charge right over for us all to see. A little later another female came out and spent some time diving down for roots and other greens from the bottom of the lake. But, alas no male showed up on this occasion - oh well you can't have it all, as they say.



Female Moose & Calf

Other wildlife I came across in Jasper included black bears, elk, rocky mountain sheep, ground squirrels and pika. It was especially nice to see the pika as they had been missing for the last couple of years. These high altitude small members of the rabbit family are particularly vulnerable to heat exhaustion caused by global warming affecting high altitude peaks. (See Blog Entry - [Pika](#))

Arriving home again I just had enough time to visit the bears of Bute Inlet here on the BC coast, again with [Discovery Marine Safaris](#). It was great to get back in there and in good weather too. I visited this area a second time and this time the weather was extremely wet and the river and surrounding creeks were at bursting point. This meant there was nowhere for the bears to fish as the fast flowing rivers were too deep and all the dead fish from the shallows had been washed out to sea. Nevertheless we still came across some bears, including a family of [mum and two 'fur ball' cubs](#).



Grizzly Mum & Fur balls!

To finish off the year, thanks to my friend Roger (from [Stubbs Island Whale Watch](#)), I had a trip out with him on his boat to see the humpback whales still pottering around in Johnstone Strait off the north end of Vancouver Island. This was a good day out and not only did we spot the whales, but also some migratory Sooty Shearwaters that had stopped over for a rest and a meal before continuing their mighty migration from the arctic to New Zealand. (see blog entry '[Sooty Shearwater](#)')

With my time out on the road (and water) all but complete for the year I was left with a lot of material to start editing and preparing for my Christmas shows here on Vancouver Island.

The [website](#) continues to grow and many of the images captured throughout the year can now be found there. 2015 also saw a 1,000 'hits' increase on 2014 with a little over 15,000 views from 98 different countries. So if you're abroad anytime and have a weblink, why not check the site out for something new and let's see if we can get 100 countries for 2016.

Talking of 2016, plans are already starting to come in and I will once again be out on the road across various parts of BC, hopefully to see the bears of the Khutzeymateen and see who has made it back once again, as well as visits to a few other favourite locations and maybe one or two new spots too.

I've recently had confirmation of a boat charter for a photo tour to photograph the bears of Knight Inlet again in June. These tours only have limited space, so if you'd like to attend, sign up on the [website](#) as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

New images will be posted on the website throughout the year and news and stories will continue to appear regularly on the [blog](#) page. Don't forget to '[subscribe](#)' to be amongst the first to learn of blog updates and reports from the field, as well as news of any open field trips.

My book '[Encounters](#)' is now all but sold out. It is out of print and just one or two copies are still available locally should anyone still be looking for one.

As always you can keep up to date on the [Steve Williamson Photography Blog](#) page and on the new [Facebook page](#). Talking of Facebook, for visitors of the Khutzeymateen there has been a new group page set up to allow visitors to share their stories and keep up to date with news from the area and with the comings and goings of the bears they've seen. You can join this closed group here - [Friends of the Khutzeymateen](#).

I'll be at a few shows locally here on Vancouver Island when I can throughout the year too, so if you're out and about at any of the shows, please stop by and say hi.

My work would not mean as much without the continued support of my family, friends, clients and colleagues throughout the year, my thanks to you all.

Have a great year!

Steve



www.stevewphotography.ca

