

The Born Killer

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Being lost is not the same thing as being unable to find your destination. You're lost when you give up looking. Even the best maps are missing some lakes that are fishable with a fly rod. So even though I had not located my intended fishing spot, I reassured myself that I was not lost.

The small lake I was searching for on this day was at the top of the Missouri River watershed in the Centennial Valley and falls into that phantom category. By midday I was still looking for the markers I needed to locate my destination.

As I walked along with my day pack and rod, I decided that if I had to stay overnight at lakeside, I would keep a small fish for dinner. This was contrary to my commitment as a catch and release fisherman and a terrible argument ensued. The conservationist would eat sage brush before murdering a fish and the born killer in me maintained that it was alright to sustain myself with the meat of the cutthroat trout that populate the fishery I was looking for.

Mammals come in two varieties... those that are being hunted and those that are doing the hunting. Almost every species is a member of each these categories at some point in their lives. There are very few that belong strictly to the predator club. When humans first organized towns and left the predation to the specialists, they handed off their spot at the top of the natural food chain in North America to the grizzly bear. The picture of this intelligent carnivore that first comes to mind is the one that frequently fronts the sporting magazines. The snarling bear has some unfortunate hunter inescapably cornered and is about to make a meal of the terrified victim. This is the image that sells the most magazines and therefore is the image we see most often.

After I had my lunch and a nap, I remembered an incident that took place in the Hayden Valley of Yellowstone National Park in the summer of 1973. A string of elk lazily plodded toward the forest at the edge of a wide meadow. As the first cow reached the trees, an adult grizzly bear exploded from the timber. As the elk wheeled to run, the sow grabbed it by the haunches and shoved the animal's rump to the ground like it was a squirming puppy at bath time. The sow's cubs came bouncing out of the trees to inspect mom's prize. When the bear was ready, she released the elk and the unharmed animal joined the rest of the herd in their flight.

The genetic predisposition to kill in the predator species, is hard to override. The grizzly bear has apparently done it successfully and actively passes on the finer points of managing important resources to the next generation. This is hardly the slobbering savage we see on the magazine covers.

Remembering the grizzly bear incident usually generates a round of self examination that I feel I need less frequently as I get older. Humans were born to kill, but we can also decide against it. I knew of one steelhead fisherman that tied his own flies, then broke the hook off at the bend. He was only interested in getting a hit. To him the successful deception was the whole point of fishing.

For many years, any debate between the predator and the conservationist, has tipped in favor of the fish. I was on the right trail that day, but I had picked the wrong creek drainage. I spent the day hiking through the high prairie in quiet thought. I packed only enough food for lunch and I guess it's just as well that I never found the lake I had set out to fish that morning. I would have just let all the fish go and then sat around the evening fire, eating left over granola with my killer instinct suppressed,