# Grizzly research unites Alberta expert, NHL superstar Mats Sundin

## Sweden brings bears back from brink

**BY KEITH GEREIN, EDMONTON JOURNAL** AUGUST 25, 2010 6:59 AM


Alberta bear researcher Gordon Stenhouse, left, and retired NHL superstar Mats Sundin hold grizzly cubs in Sweden.
**Photograph by:** Supplied, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - Of all the places to meet a celebrity, the backwoods of Sweden might seem to be among the least likely.

That's what Gordon Stenhouse thought when he travelled to the Scandinavian wilderness in April to conduct research on grizzly bears.

One day, on a field trip, Stenhouse's camp received a surprise visitor. The new arrival did not have brown fur, a long snout and dark eyes, but instead came with blond hair, blue eyes and a face recognizable from countless broadcasts of Hockey Night in Canada.

It was retired Swedish superstar Mats Sundin.

"When I was there, it was not too long after Canada won hockey gold in the Olympics, so I took over some Team Canada jerseys for the Swedish researchers -- not wanting to rub it in or anything," Stenhouse said. "Well, they made a phone call to Mats and he came up from Stockholm with his father. It turns out he is very interested in wildlife and the bear project in Sweden."

Stenhouse and Sundin ended up spending the day together, helping to catch 10 to 15 bears, including some cubs. The research team tranquilized the animals, took samples from them and installed transmitters before releasing them into the woods.

"It was kind of a unique experience," Stenhouse said. "I talked a lot with Mats about bears and conservation and then we talked a lot of about hockey -- goalies he's faced, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Edmonton Oilers, of course."

Stenhouse didn't go to Scandinavia to meet celebrities, but to lay the groundwork for a new international research partnership that could help Alberta improve the status of its threatened grizzly population.

That agreement between the Hinton-based Foothills Research Institute and the Scandinavian Brown Bear Research Project, based in Sweden, will allow experts on two continents to compare notes, share data and conduct joint studies.

The partnership is an ideal fit because Sweden has overcome the conservation struggles Alberta currently faces, said Stenhouse, head of the Foothills institute's grizzly bear program.

The Scandinavian brown bear, as the grizzly is called in that part of the world, was near extinction in the 1930s. But from a total of about 130 animals, it has since grown to a population of more than 3,300.

Alberta's population has been going the other way, declining to an estimated 700 grizzlies. The provincial government recently declared the bear a threatened species, promising a renewed ban on hunting, expansion of the BearSmart programs, money for research and public education.

"Basically, the Scandinavians have recovered their brown bear population and we can learn a lot from them, because in Alberta we are at the stage of trying to recover our population," Stenhouse said of the partnership, which will also include the Canadian Co-operative Wildlife Health Centre.

"They have taken some different actions and some different approaches to things, and made it a priority."

One of the lessons Sweden may have for Alberta is in the area of forestry practices. While Alberta tends to do a lot of clear cutting, Swedish forestry does more "thinning," in which only some trees are taken from a given area, Stenhouse said.

That thinning allows more sunlight to penetrate the forest, helping to produce more berries that are a key food source for bears. With more food available, the animals tend to do better, which may explain why Scandinavian female grizzlies produce a lot of triplets, whereas their Alberta counterparts usually have twins, he said.

The new partnership will look at the effects of forestry, along with other factors that can put stress on bears.

Jeff Gailus, a bear scientist and author of the book The Grizzly Manifesto: In Defence of the Great Bear, said the biggest difference he can see between Alberta and Sweden is in people's attitudes to wildlife.

"There is more support for not hunting the animals, people are more tolerant of having them around and there doesn't seem to be as many problems with poaching," he said. "Here, we still seem to have that frontier mentality."

In addition to forestry, grizzlies are also believed to be highly sensitive to road activity and industrial development, he said.

"Knuckleheads" who tear around restricted wilderness areas on noisy ATVs can cause great disruption to the animals, he said, but even relatively low-volume roads or trails can drive away bears, pushing them into another area where they come into conflict with humans.

Much like Alberta, Sweden has a high number of roads that criss-cross through prime bear habitat, Gailus said.

"That's why this new (partnership) may be politically motivated," he said. "In Alberta, we're looking for solutions that will allow us to maintain our industrial activity and road densities. Sweden has high road densities and has recovered its grizzlies, so it's seen as an example that we might be able to replicate."

Gailus thinks the United States is a better place than Sweden to look for solutions, because attitudes and land pressures there tend to be similar to Alberta.

Stenhouse said the partnership is initially scheduled for two years, but he hopes to find more funding to extend it.

He said the Swedish team has been collecting samples from bears for 28 years, a valuable source of data that Alberta's researchers will need time to study.

"For example, they know who the great-grandfather is of a bear today from studying the genetics over that time. That will help us to understand things like the health of a population over time and measures of stress in these animals over time. They've got data sets we can use that we don't have in Alberta that might help us chart a course to recovery."

On the flip side, Alberta can offer some new research approaches to Sweden, such as the technique of mapping habitats, he said.

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Sweden's grizzly population shrank to about 130 animals in the 1930s. Today, the country is home to more than 3,300.
**Photograph by:** Handout, AFP, Getty Images, Edmonton Journal

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