

# Appalachia

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Volume 69  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2018: Role Reversal in  
the Mountains*

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Article 8

2018

## Problembär: Germany's First Bear in 170 Years

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### Recommended Citation

Curtin, Brendan (2018) "Problembär: Germany's First Bear in 170 Years," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss2/8>

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# Problembär

*Germany's first bear in 170 years*

**Brendan Curtin**



IN EARLY MAY 2006, A 220-POUND EURASIAN BROWN BEAR KNOWN as JJ1 wandered across the Dolomite Mountains of northeast Italy, traversed the Austrian Alps, and became the first bear to set foot on German soil in 170 years. By the end of June, he'd been shot and killed by Bavarian hunters.

The Eurasian brown bear, *Ursus arctos arctos*, was largely extirpated from the Alps by the early 1800s and now survives only in isolated pockets of Slovenia, Italy, and the Austrian alpine lake region called Carinthia. JJ1—nicknamed Bruno by the local media that picked up his story even amid the racket of the German-hosted World Cup—was the son of Jurka, a bear released as a collaborative conservation effort between Austria, Slovenia, and Italy to reintroduce the species to its historical range.

But Bruno roamed farther than anyone expected and developed habits displeasing to the *Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Umwelt* (Bavarian State Ministry of the Environment): robbing beehives, ransacking chicken coops, and harassing livestock. At final count, he killed more than 30 sheep and goats, and a handful of chickens, doves, and rabbits. He spoiled nine beehives, damaged at least four silage bales, fence lines, and deer troughs, and snacked on one German family's pet guinea pig. The first bear to enter Bavaria in nearly two centuries, Bruno didn't know to keep his interests to morels. He saw only a smorgasbord of fat mutton and succulent honey. There was no orchestra or choreography—only meat. Everywhere he turned.

Of concern to the *Staatsministerium* was that Bruno's hunting habit was not just for food. In a behavior known as surplus killing, he left bloodied corpses of livestock uneaten and bloated on meadow slopes. First, the government tried to capture Bruno alive. But whether they would have returned Bruno to Italy or shipped him off to the Mönchengladbach Zoo, we will never know. He dodged U.S.-built grizzly traps and nipped back into Austria whenever chasers closed in. The state flew in a team of expert trackers from Finland, but the slippery bruin eluded the posse until their Norwegian elkhounds collapsed from exhaustion.

SURPLUS KILLING IS NOT BEHAVIOR EXCLUSIVE TO BEARS. IN 2004, 9 wolves in Idaho killed 70 sheep in a single night. Weasels in northern Alaska

*The bear should have found a mate and lived a long life. Instead, he wandered across the border and ended up in a museum.* FABIAN RUPPRECHT



*The bear nicknamed Bruno wandered from the Dolomites in northeast Italy, across western Austria, and into the Mangfall Mountains, where he was shot.* LARRY GARLAND/  
APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

hunt voles in excess. My aunt's cat leaves soggy goldfinches on the doormat several times a week.

The goldfinches are flicked—with the toe of a house slipper—into the mulch beneath the hydrangeas, the cat dismissed back to the yard, but the wolves, all nine, were executed by federal agents, and Bruno the bear was pursued through the Mangfall Mountains and shot to death.

In the wild, surplus killing is no tragedy. If predators cull more than they can eat—a survival tactic to exploit opportunity in particularly harsh seasons—the spare meat is sometimes cached in deep snow or shallow graves to be returned to when prey is scarce. If not, there is no shortage of scavengers to clean up the scraps. The tragedy occurs when humans flood hillsides with livestock and reconstruct the law of the jungle from survival of the fittest to survival of whichever we decide.

Thirty sheep may seem excessive until we realize that not only are we moving the bear (after removing, replacing, returning, and then removing again), but that, globally, humans are the largest surplus killers of any species. *National Geographic* reports that American sport hunters imported more than 1.26 million wildebeests, black bears, ducks, leopards, rhinos, snow geese, and other exotic game trophies through U.S. Customs ports in the last decade alone.

FOR A WHILE IT SEEMED BRUNO WOULD DEFY THE ODDS, BURGLING farmers and paddling alpine ponds until he decided to wander on—maybe to Belgium or the hills of southern France. Aided by hard weather and false sightings called in by panicked civilians, Bruno evaded his pursuers for almost two months. Mountain bikers, hikers, and motorists glimpsed the bear hundreds of meters off, flitting between valleys and dashing across roads. Most proof of Bruno's prowling was limited to day-after evidence of slaughtered lambs and crippled bee houses, some of which was fabricated or caused by wild dogs.

But then Bruno was spotted outside Kumpflalm Hut, near Rotwand Mountain, and Bavarian hunters were dispatched to the location overnight. Just before 5 A.M., in the early light of June 26, the first bear to visit Germany since 1836 was shot twice in the body. "The bear was killed immediately," Otmar Bernhard, an official in the Bavarian State Ministry of the Environment, told the press.

Bruno is now stuffed and displayed in the *Museum Mensch und Natur* (Museum of Man and Nature) in Munich, eternally poised on the wrong side of a fence, mouth full of honeycomb, ravaging a beehive. He's paused mid-chew, tufted ears perked, as if he hears something coming in the distance. His new black glass eyes glimmer dully under the bulbs in the museum, as though his 2-year-old brown bear mind is puzzling over the word reflected backward on the walls of his case: *Problembär*.

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BRENDAN CURTIN is a triple-crown backpacker (Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, and Continental Divide Trail) who grew up in the snowbelt of Ohio and the sheep pastures of New York. A 2013 graduate of Hiram College, he entered the MFA in Creative Writing and Environment program at Iowa State University in 2017. He loves bears, owls, and the smell of old sleeping bags.

*Editor's note: In 2010, Spiegel Online reported that German officials had released a management plan for brown bears should hikers ever run into one, but no bear is known to have crossed the border since Bruno. The article, "U.S. Diplomats Analyzed Death of Bruno the Bear," was about WikiLeaks documents on U.S. diplomats' response to Bruno's shooting.*