

### Bear Biologist

1 From the moment conservation biologist Wes Larson entered the long sandstone tunnel, he could see the black bear at the other end. The 350-pound mammal simply stared back. Larson was in a remote area of Bryce Canyon National Park, trying to trap the bear to change its radio collar, which had dying batteries.



2 Larson crawled within eight feet of the bear, sat motionless to see if the bear might get aggressive, then finally jabbed it with a syringe full of tranquilizers affixed to the end of a pole. Nothing happened. So he administered another dose. Eventually, the bear crawled groggily out of the cave, where Larson was able to affix a new radio collar, weigh it, measure it, and take vital signs.

3 The trapping is part of a multiyear study Larson, 33, is working on for his master's degree in wildlife and wildlands conservation at Brigham Young University. He is a new breed of scientist, sharing his work not only in academic papers but also with other people through a robust Instagram feed (@grizkid), where snapshots of himself with sedated bears, his pet orphaned raccoon and other wildlife have snagged more than 90,000 followers.

4 Growing up in western Montana, Larson was always curious about wildlife, fishing, and backpacking and exploring creeks for frogs, turtles, and snakes.

...

...

...

So Larson went into his office about every other week for about a year. Finally Smith hired him as a field tech to work on a study of polar bears in the Arctic.

5 Now, as a master's student and research apprentice, Larson is primarily working on two bear studies. Besides his study on black bears, he is helping find polar bear caves and monitors hibernating females to determine exit times, denning behaviors, and any effects on the animals

from oil industry activity. The work can be extremely hard – he has withstood temperatures of minus 54°C, cold enough to make his eyeballs freeze – but he insists polar bears aren't as terrifying as their reputation might suggest. "Polar bears are curious, and when they do want to investigate a person as a potential food source, it's scary just because you know they're trying to eat you," says Larson. "But we're working with females that are resting, and they truly want nothing to do with us. They want to protect their young."

- 6 While most science is a long, detailed, and often not so glamorous process, these activities naturally make for sensational social media. And over the years, Larson's Instagram feed has evolved from a way to share his daily adventures with friends to a method for getting non-scientists interested in conservation biology. "It's a way to spread a conservation message outside of the typical scientific formula," says Larson. "I think my posts on Instagram and some of this other outreach helps people understand a little more about how conservation works and how biologists are actually out there trying to learn more about wildlife to protect them."

*www.nationalgeographic.com, 2016*