

# Things Are Bruin!

Oregon bears are on the move. What's a bear? Well, for starters, you gotta have heart...

by Patrick Collins • photos by Linda Kliewer



The bears in their den, the Dirty Duck Tavern

To the uninitiated, the term *bear* probably conjures up a number of images. There are grizzly bears, polar bears, teddy bears. Bedtime stories are rich with tales of mama bears and papa bears and cubs. Add to the list the Oregon Bears, and you're in for some serious confusion.

Gail Kennedy, owner of Gail's Dirty Duck Tavern in Northwest Portland, has been hosting the Oregon Bears' monthly beer bust for nearly three years now.

"I feed the boys well," she says from the tiny kitchen in the back of her tavern, adding that her primary reason for cooking is the enjoyment of watching people eat.

Kennedy is the daughter of the late Mama Bernice, legendary in bear circles for throwing

ashtrays at pre-bear bears when their language got out of hand. When asked what makes a bear a bear, Kennedy laughs and says the bears are a nice group of guys.

"They're mellow," she says, and turns back to the grill.

The bears themselves are even more vague when it comes to definition.

"I'm not sure what it means to be a bear, exactly," was the overwhelming response served up by members during an impromptu meeting of the board of the Oregon Bears.

A couple of hours before the beer bust, board members were perfectly willing to sit down and share the stories of their lives, as well as the history of their organization. But they were all hard-pressed to actually define the term *bear*, a term which, to a certain degree, defines them.

Generally, the consensus was that a bear is a relatively heavy man who tends to have more than an average amount of body hair. Bears generally fall on the more masculine side of the gender spectrum, but there are a few drag queens who belong to the Oregon Bears. There's even a woman member, a bear who calls herself Babalou.

Then there are the cubs, the seals, the wolves, the otters, and the polar bears. Cubs are generally younger. Bears-in-training, perhaps. Polar bears have white or gray hair. Like the walking, talking versions of yesteryear's hankie codes, wolves and seals and otters seem to define sexual practices, more than age or appearance: top or bottom, aggressive or passive. Depending, of course, upon whom you ask, and when, and probably where.

And then there are those who admire the bears, all of them, and there are plenty of admirers.

They are not pretty boys. If conventional wisdom calls for gay men to exist just beyond the curve of fashion and firmly embedded within the ethos of physical perfection, the bears break every rule, and do so with an unapologetic sense of raucousness.

At the bears' monthly beer bust, the mood is one of unrestrained celebration. Fifty or so large men, many in plaid shirts, blue jeans and industrial boots, make their way across the smoke-filled tavern, hugging, kissing and laughing with one another. There are raffle tickets for sale at the entrance, hats for sale beside the jukebox. Some wear earrings; a few wear nose rings. Many sport beards—thick, furry, Alaskanesque beards. The beer flows like water, consumed with a holiday-like glee from red plastic cups, and from the kitchen wafts the aroma of hamburgers and fries. Everyone seems to say hello to everyone.

On a pool table near the front door, Oregon Bears corresponding secretary Mark Brooks has arranged his collection of pamphlets and newsletters from across the country and around the world. The Oregon Bears has a member in England and another in Germany, he says proudly, making it an international organization.

"We keep the politics at the front door," he says. "Or we try to. Our emphasis is on people getting together and having a good time without all the attitude. We're guys who are tired of being discriminated against, so in a way we're outcasts gathered together."

The bears also go roller-skating at Oaks Park, hold potlucks and book-selling parties, and make a monthly trip to the Club Portland baths, an event known as Bears at the Baths.

"But that's not all there is to it," says Brooks. "There are people who want to drink beer and have lots of sex. But there are lots of us who just want to get together to socialize."

Once a year the bears host a weekend of riverboat cruises, brunches and battleship tours that coincides with Portland's Rose Festival. Whatever your communal appetite, you're likely to find it, sooner or later, beneath the umbrella of the Oregon Bears. One point on which all of the bears seem to agree is the importance of raising money.

"We're a service organization," says board secretary Randy Huntley. The group raises money through its \$6 annual membership dues, as well as its beer busts, raffles and sales from items such as T-shirts and caps.

The group's primary charity is Esther's Pantry, which provides meals for those living

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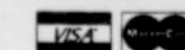
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