

Toyota-Sponsored Documentarian has Passion for Salmon, Grizzlies

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The life of an outdoor documentarian is a mixture of pulse-pounding adventure and occasional peril. For Idaho journalist Kris Millgate, she wouldn't have it any other way.

Millgate owns Tight Line Media, a company that is equally adept at both visual and print journalism. Her love affair for nature stems from her childhood when she would scan the skies for a rare glimpse of a bald eagle, near her home. Today, her work takes her thousands of miles, through meandering waterways and over challenging land masses. Millgate is presently riding a tide of success, as her one-year-old documentary, "Ocean to Idaho," has been collecting an array of awards from several outdoor media associations and environment-focused film festivals. Her 30-minute film also earned Millgate a pair of local Emmy nominations.

"Ocean to Idaho" chronicles the journey of Chinook salmon and their round-trip migration from Idaho nesting tributaries to the Pacific Ocean and back. With a life expectancy of five years, the featured salmon will travel four rivers and three states to get to the Pacific, where they live for two to three years, before returning home.

“This project was on my bucket list,” Millgate said. “I saw my first salmon in 2017, near the end of its life cycle, and I thought how fascinating it would be to track this species on its journey from the ocean to Idaho.”

The fish featured in this film traveled 850 miles on their return trip home. However, most never return to their original nesting grounds, which is why Chinook are on the endangered species list. Besides natural predators, salmon must combat human obstacles such as electrical dams and sport fisherman. While essential to the local economy and area residents, electrical dams can be especially problematic for the fish, but Millgate was determined not to have the documentary be a one-sided film. She interviewed Native Americans, recreationalists, farmers, environmentalists, biologists and civil engineers to gain their unique perspectives on the subject of dams vs. salmon.

“My goal was to not tell viewers what to think but to show all sides of a complex subject,” she said.

The documentary took a physical toll on Millgate as she dedicated nearly a year to filming and production work. Her travels took her 80 miles by raft and 4,606 miles by vehicle, as she gathered her footage. The rigors of the shoot also forced her to use five cameras, one which suffered a broken lens, while enduring bruises and stiches from various injuries. She also burned through three surgical masks and two jugs of sanitizer, as her principal shooting was done in 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I pretty much isolated myself on the road for everyone’s safety,” Millgate said. “It made for some lonely times but I’m really happy with the finished product.”

Millgate was highly complementary of Teton Toyota of Idaho Falls, who provided funding and exclusive usage of a Tundra pickup for the documentary.

“I couldn’t have done this project without Toyota,” Millgate said. “Their investment and involvement was paramount in the completion of this film.”

Travis Zmak, managing partner and general manager at Teton Toyota, said the dealership has been partnering with Millgate for several years, back when she had a local outdoor television show. He said the decision to fund “Ocean to Idaho” was a personal one.

“When I started talking to her about the project, I felt her passion and knew that we could help from a funding standpoint. My desire for working together on the documentary was to know that I could someday fish for salmon with my sons the same way my father and I did growing up,” Zmak said.



Zmak also said that Teton Toyota’s relationship with a local celebrity, like Millgate, resonates with many of his customers, especially those with a strong affection for the great outdoors.

“In eastern Idaho, we are a mecca for fly fishing, snow skiing, hiking, mountain biking, and hunting, so a majority of our customers spend extensive time in the outdoors,” Zmak said. “At Toyota, we want to be the way that people get to the outdoors, to pursue their passions – helping them get to the places they dream about.”

Not content to bask in her recent success, Millgate and Teton Toyota have already embarked on their next endangered species migration documentary. Principal filming for “On Grizzly Ground” has already begun in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. With more than 1,000 Grizzly bears in the region, Millgate will focus on routes frequented by a creature constantly on the move – albeit with long-range cameras.

“As large as they are, Grizzlies can travel 1,000 miles in a summer, and make similar trips 30 times during their lifetimes,” she said. “We need to track them and understand them because there are bound to be more Grizzly-human engagements in the future. Unlike salmon, these bears could kill me, so a majority of my filming will be done from a very safe distance.”

“On Grizzly Ground” will be completed later this year, with a release date in summer, 2023.