

The Road to

PUTIN

by Gayne C. Young

In a rare interview with our Young Outdoors columnist, the popular Russian prime minister reveals his passion for fishing and conservation.

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I was marlin fishing on the waters off Cabo San Lucas when my *Outdoor Life* interview with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin hit newsstands and the Web. Given the prime minister's stature and worldwide popularity, and the fact that he'd spoken very little to the press in recent years, I expected there would be some interest in my interview. But it wasn't until my phone started ringing that I knew just how much.

One minute I was drinking a cold Dos Equis, bragging about my day's fishing, the next I was fielding calls from the *New York Times*, *London Daily Telegraph*, the *BBC*, the *Austin American-Statesman* and a host of other news outlets, some of which I'd never heard of. While I was yakking on the phone, my friend Mark Buchanan was Googling my name and Putin's. He found the interview translated into French, Japanese, Russian and Australian (Okay, they speak English in Oz but they did add a bunch of U's to my words. That's kind of a translation.)

Regardless of where these media were located or the politics behind them, they all wanted to know the same thing: How did I get the interview? My off-the-record answer: I'm still not sure.

Putin hikes down a rocky mountainside to one of his favorite wilderness streams. Opposite: The prime minister with his catch of salmon.



My road to Vladimir Putin started in August 2010 when I wrote a series of blogs for the *Outdoor Life* Web page about the former Russian president's fondness for outdoor activities, his conservation efforts, and the fact that he gets to "hunt endangered species with a dart gun." I found his adventures with tigers and other endangered animals to be extremely exciting. I also found them to be extremely un-PC. I commented on this in my blogs, saying that I couldn't think of another world politician who would be photographed with a rifle, let alone be seen darting a tiger or shooting a gray whale with a crossbow even if for scientific research. My blogs turned out to be immensely popular, with each one gaining more attention and more of an audience than the last.

One of my later blogs, in which I wrote an open letter to the prime minister asking to accompany him on one of his upcoming adventures, was picked up by the mainstream media in Russia and a host of other countries throughout Europe and Asia. It was translated into several different languages (even Australian) and carried in newspapers around the world.

Given the positive response to my open letter, I decided that the next logical step, and the only way to top my latest blog, would be to try to speak to Putin myself. I knew the

chances of this happening were slim to none, but decided to try anyway. I even asked Web readers to wager on whether or not I would actually get the interview.

After several weeks of calling, I finally got through to Press Secretary Yevgeniy Khorishko. He politely listened to me explain that my interview would focus on conservation, the prime minister's Amur Tiger Protection Programme, and hunting and fishing. Politics would not be discussed. Khorishko asked me to send my request in writing, which I did. Somehow my first request got lost. I was asked to send another. I did. I repeatedly called to inquire about the status of my request. I was told to be patient. Weeks passed. I'd

almost given up hope when Khorishko called and requested me to put my questions to the prime minister in writing.

"I'll put something together this weekend," I promised.

"No," Khorishko countered. "I need today. By five o'clock." I checked my watch. I had 45 minutes.

Now would be a good time to admit that, even though I'm a writer, I can't type very well. I hunt and peck. So for 45 minutes I hunted and pecked like a madman. I was working so fast that I didn't have time to be upset that he was expecting my questions on such short notice.

At 5 p.m. sharp Khorishko called, asking for my questions. I told him I was still working on them. He said he needed them "now." I sent him what I had and hoped for the best.

"I love it [fishing] and enjoy every opportunity. How else could I have managed to go fishing in America while accompanied by two presidents?"



I received Putin's response in mid-January and was immediately in awe of his answers. Why? Because his answers were direct, showed a great sense of humor, and were almost all pro-hunting and fishing.

Not unlike me, much of Putin's connection with the outdoors came via books. "I have always loved and avidly read the novels of Jack London, Jules Verne and Ernest Hemingway. The characters depicted in their books are brave and resourceful people embarking on exciting adventures, which definitely shaped my inner self and nourished my love for the outdoors."

Youth camps and teachers also greatly influenced this love. "In this respect, I was lucky enough . . . I also had very good teachers."

Putin stated that hunting and fishing are part of our history and something to be cherished. "These activities are natural for man, since they were an integral part of our ancestors' lives. In many countries of the world – in Great Britain, for instance – hunting remains one of the vivid national traditions."

Putin has put this understanding, along with his personal feelings, to good use throughout his career. For more than two decades he has been a staunch supporter of wildlife conservation and scientific study. He currently supports research and conservation projects for leopards, tigers, beluga whales and polar bears. Unlike many Western politicians, Putin takes hunting into account as a viable part of conservation.

When I suggested that limited hunting could be used to help protect and partially save Amur tigers as it had black rhinos, he

responded: "I am aware of such programmes. For instance, Pakistan has for many years used a similar model of trophy hunting for wild sheep recorded in the Red Book. However, it is not time yet for doing the same thing for tigers."

"A solution to this problem, as we see it, is the natural increase in food supply for tigers, meaning wild boar, roe deer, musk deer and [red] deer. For that purpose, we are implementing programmes to support hunting grounds and organizing controlled ungulate hunting in tiger habitats. The funds received from licenses are partially spent for biotechnical activities such as supplementary feeding of animals in winter and route clearance for their free movement."

While the Prime Minister clearly understands hunting, his true passion is fishing. "It is congenial to me; I love it and enjoy any opportunity, which I have very rarely unfortunately, to sit with a fishing rod. To tell the truth, sometimes my job even helps me. How else could I have managed to go fishing in America while accompanied by two presidents?"

Asked to name the best fishing spots in Russia, Putin

replied with firsthand knowledge. "According to my personal rating, one can have the best fishing in the world in the Murmansk Region and in the Volga River delta near Astrakhan . . . I was very impressed by the fishing in the Republic of Tuva. There is the Khemchik River, which is the largest left tributary of the Upper Yenisei River, or the Ulug-Khem, as the native people call it. I assure everyone that you will have an unforgettable time and not only on the Khemchik banks, but throughout Tuva in general."

In my interview the prime minister recommended other spots for fishing and for hunting and sightseeing in Russia. His knowledge of the outdoors and the best places to experience it was truly remarkable. Even more remarkable, and inspiring to hunters and anglers, is that all this love and understanding of the natural world comes from one of the most powerful and popular men in the world.

Because of our interview, Putin's views on hunting and fishing were made public the

world over. Historically speaking, the last globally recognized politician to understand and enjoy these sports as much as Putin was Theodore Roosevelt, whose term as president ended more than a century ago.

I hope America's politicians and other world leaders will heed Putin's words regarding conservation. I hope his understanding of the facts – that hunting and fishing are viable tools in conservation efforts – will open dialogues and brings change to public misinterpretations about hunters and anglers. Of course, what I really hope is that Putin makes good on his promise to take me fishing. ♣



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PRIME MINISTER

The prime minister actively supports wildlife research programs in his country. Above, he adjusts a radio telemetry collar on an Amur tiger and opposite, he prepares to fire a tracking dart into a beluga whale.

