

13

BLACK BEARS

IN MANY PARTS of the country bear sightings are increasing (Figure 30). Part of the reason for this is that “suburbs” are encroaching on wildlife habitat, but part must be attributed as well to the recovery of forest habitat that bears prefer. In New England, for example, forests have been reestablished on nearly 70 percent of the land previously cleared and worked for agriculture. Along with this reforestation come bears.

Traditional conflicts between humans and bears involved bear raids on crops and beehives. Assaults on garbage cans, bird feeders, and barbecue grills can now be added to the list, as can occasional attempts to establish winter dens under porches and decks and occasional run-ins with domestic pets. Because bears are large and powerful animals, encounters with them must be taken seriously, although the frequency with which they happen is remarkably low. Yet it seems that every encounter with bears receives headline attention in the press, not only because such meetings are so rare but also because bears are one of the few animals capable of reminding

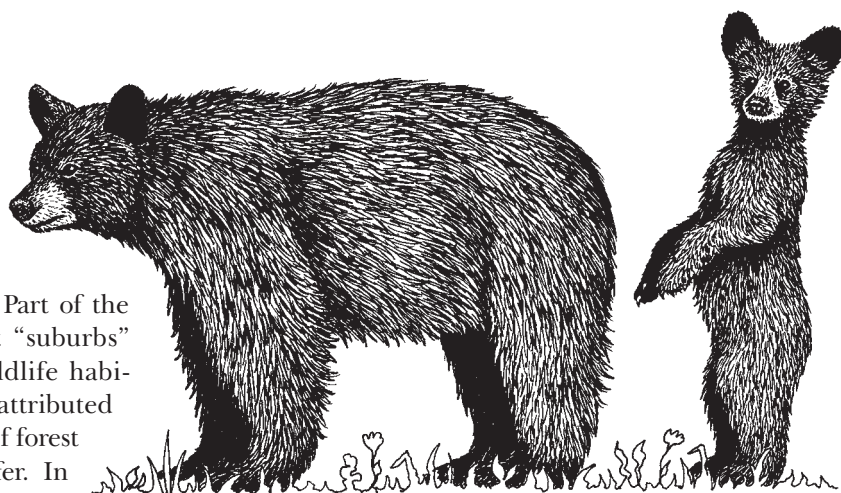


Figure 30 *Black bear sow and cub*

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- ◆ **Black bears are the smallest of the three bear species native to the United States, although that might provide little comfort if you find yourself standing next to one in the grocery checkout line.**
 - ◆ **A dog-like woof is sometimes all hikers hear as a bear they have startled takes off at full clip.**
 - ◆ **Bears are not true hibernators. Although a black bear’s heart rate drops to eight beats per minute during his winter lethargy, his temperature only drops a few degrees.**
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human beings that they are not the only big, powerful mammal out there.

Classification and Range

The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the most widespread and smallest of the three bears found in North America, while the larger polar (*Thalarctos maritimus*) and brown (*U. arctos*) bears are found in fewer places on the continent. The grizzly is the best known of a group of closely related brown bears that are among the most formidable carnivores in the world. Black bears range throughout Canada, the eastern United States, and throughout the West, excluding most of the Great Plains and Great Basin areas. The range of black bears generally follows the range of the continent's older, more mature forests or recovering woodlands.

Habits

Black bears occupy a variety of habitats. In the East they favor deciduous woodlands; in the Southwest chaparral and scrub forests may be used. Bears require fairly large areas to sustain themselves and are generally intolerant of other bears (outside of the sow-cub relationship). These characteristics contribute to the low population densities typical of all bears. The movements of individuals within their range may vary considerably based on the availability of preferred foods.

Many people assume black bears are exclusively meat eaters while, in fact, plant foods make up the bulk of their diet. Ripening fruits, berries, and nuts are eaten heavily, but when these are not available, the average black bear may simply graze on leafy or herbaceous vegetation. The non-plant foods bears eat can vary from insects to occasional small live prey. Bears are opportunistic hunters and will also take deer fawns, but they usually are not able to catch more agile adults. They will also eat carrion.

Black bear cubs are born in late January or February and remain with the mother through the next winter, setting out on their



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Figure 31 Where dumpsters are unprotected in bear country, bears will be found.

own when they are about eighteen months old. Females do not breed again until the cubs are old enough to survive independently. Studies have shown that the reproductive rate of black bears is closely linked to food availability. In years when mast crops are small, females may mature more slowly, have fewer cubs, or forgo reproduction completely. Add the fact that females do not usually begin breeding until they are between three and five years of age, and it is clear that this animal's reproductive patterns keep its populations low.

Denning, or winter lethargy, occurs during the winter. Even in the South most bears enter into a dormancy period, although it may not last as long or be as profound as the winter sleep of bears farther north. Rock ledges, brush piles, hollow trees, and occasionally spaces under decks and patios or in culvert pipes provide refuge from winter cold. Research has shown that bears will shorten the length of their dormancy period in areas where human refuse is reliably available.

Public Health Concerns

There are no significant diseases or parasites of bears that can be transmitted to humans.

Rabies does occur in these animals, but it is so rare that no confirmed exposures of humans have been recorded

Problems

Bears den occasionally under decks or porches, especially in summer houses or residences that are used only periodically. They raid gardens and get into trash with a facility that aptly demonstrates their size, power, and intelligence (Figure 31). Bird feeders, dirty grills, and pet food left outdoors are magnets to a hungry bear. Black bears also occasionally cause significant damage to beehives and field crops.

Solutions

Tolerance

As with all of the species discussed here, tolerance and understanding have a key role to play in how human beings approach conflicts with them, even (or maybe especially) with animals as large and formidable as black bears. Large animals tend to be potentially more dangerous to people than most small ones, but they also tend to be less common and require a larger living area, or home range, to sustain them. For a homeowner, an encounter with a bear might be a once-in-a-lifetime event. The animal in a backyard might be a youngster moving out of his mother's home range to look for a suitable home or an adult who has come by the house to investigate a smell or sound that attracted his attention. Once he has figured out that the attraction is related to humans, he is likely to head over the mountain and not be seen again. But if he obtains a meal without negative consequences, he is more likely to return for more. With each free meal, his fear of humans and their dwellings diminishes, until conflict with people is almost inevitable.

When conflicts occur, the bear is nearly always the loser. In many states so-called nuisance bears are killed or trapped and moved to remote areas some distance from the site of

the conflict in the hope that they will not return. Some do not, but many do, and this practice is probably on its way out as aversive conditioning becomes more common. In most instances, the death of the bear could have been avoided had property owners not provided an easy meal and thus reduced the bear's natural fear of humans.

Exclusion

Electric fencing can be used to protect highly bear-attractive resources such as beehives and refuse sites. Additionally, these can be located away from areas frequently used by bears, such as berry patches, wildlife trails, and stream corridors. It is best not to place trash cans outside at night, but if it must be done, investing in a "bear-resistant" trash can or enclosure is the way to go.

It is important not to keep an open compost pile in bear country, especially one in which household refuse is dumped. Burying compost also is not advised, because bears can dig it up easily if motivated by enticing odors. Enclosed recycling bins are recommended if refuse must be stored outside; however, determined bears can break into even ruggedly built bins. Keep any grills located on decks or close to the house clean and as free of drippings as possible. It is preferable to move the grill well away from the house when it is not being used. Place birdfeeders well away from the house or forgo feeding birds in areas with known bear populations, since even this food can attract bears. Finally, as park and wildlife professionals increasingly urge, make sure when camping that food is secured at a recommended distance from the campsite.

Minimizing Contact

As is the case with other large and potentially dangerous mammals, there are rules of engagement with bears that can help to minimize the possibility of people putting themselves in danger. The rules described here for black bears are, we caution, different from those for dealing with brown or polar bears, which can be extremely dangerous in close

encounters. Black bears, on the other hand, are far more likely to withdraw than to confront humans, even when surprised. People are usually wary of black bears, and in thinking that they might be attacked or even eaten, sometimes react to encounters in ways that actually increase the likelihood of injury.

Never try to approach a black bear to drive him off, but do not allow him to feel comfortable in your backyard. Shouting, banging objects together, making as much noise as possible, and looking as big as possible (by spreading your arms, or better, a coat, outward) are all effective responses. Let the bear know you are a human. Never run. Throwing things at the bear is a proven way to get her to move off. In the rare instance in which a black bear bluff charges, experts advise standing still. The bear does this only as a warning and invariably turns and moves off after the display. After the bear leaves, remove any food sources that might have attracted her.

Errant Bears

Young bears dispersing from the area in which they were born and in search of a suitable home for themselves sometimes end up in suburbia without a good idea of how to get out. This frequently leads to a perceived crisis, in which the bear climbs a tree, a telephone pole, or anything she can reach to get away from people, who only gather in larger crowds as word spreads of the curiosity. Confusion and uncertainty, coupled with inexperience and a misconception of the threat such an animal poses, can often lead to fatal consequences for the bear.

This does not have to happen if a little foresight and planning are applied to make sure that qualified and properly equipped wildlife professionals or veterinary assistance can be called upon. Leaving the bear alone and giving her the opportunity to move off by herself is always the preferred solution. Tranquilization and removal of the trespassing bear can save a life, or it can take one, because this procedure always presents a high risk for the bear. In forced situations, however, such

action may be the best solution to protect both humans and the bear.

Repellents

There are pepper (capsaicin) sprays marketed for repelling bears, and hikers in grizzly bear country are often advised to pack these in with them. Much tested in parks where panhandling bears are a problem, the spray has also been proven to work and to be effective at chasing bears from campgrounds. Some smarter bears, however, learn the effective range (usually about ten to twelve feet) and stand just beyond that when they encounter humans who might spray them.

Community Approaches

The key to avoiding conflicts with black bears is individual responsibility—managing your property so as not to attract bears—combined with community programs. One key to community action is to pass and enforce laws that require residents, businesses, and municipalities to use bear-resistant garbage containers and fine those who intentionally or unintentionally feed bears. Another is simply public education. Fliers and informational handouts (especially in communities with a lot of turnover from tourist visits) are critical to teaching people some of the rules about living with bears.

To supplement these measures, it has become increasingly common for communities to conduct programs to educate the bears as well. The classroom is the great outdoors, and the lessons are intended to reinforce the natural wariness of bears toward humans. When a resident in bear country is concerned about the behavior of an individual bear, the first call he often makes is to the local police. By providing law enforcement personnel with the knowledge and tools they need to condition a bear to avoid people, many conflicts can be eliminated.

This aversive conditioning approach focuses on providing extremely unpleasant experiences when a bear is engaging in the undesirable behavior. The tools include rubber bullets, pyrotechnics, and pepper spray,

applied in ways that demonstrate to the bear, an animal to whom dominance relationships are all important, that humans are unquestionably the top dogs (or, if you will, top bears). The goal is to modify undesirable bear behavior without destroying the bear, thus leaving an “educated” bear as a territory holder to help repel those who have not yet been converted.

A Last Word

It is entirely possible that human-bear encounters will become more frequent in the future. People are increasingly entering bear habitat, and bears are returning to places from which they were previously extirpated. As serious as encounters between people and bears may be, the solution to conflicts is not to manage bear populations through hunting or deliberate actions intended to lower population density, since problem bears are not necessarily the ones killed in recreational hunts. The solution lies in educating people on how to behave in bear country, and, when necessary, educating bears to avoid people.

Additional Resources

Linda Masterson’s *Living With Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country* (PixyJack Press, 2006) contains lots of good information about black bears and their ways as well as different community-level approaches to resolving conflicts with them.

The Get Smart Bear Society (formerly the Whistler Bear Society), a nonprofit organization dedicated to resolving human-bear conflicts humanely, has a website at www.bearsmart.com. The society also has a guidebook to nonlethal resolution of human-bear conflicts that can be downloaded at www.bearsmart.com/bearsBackyard/Non-LethalGuidebook.PDF.

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The North American Bear Center is run by Lynn Rogers, Ph.D., an eminent bear biologist, whose close understanding of bears adds significantly to our ability to devise strategies for living in harmony with these animals (www.bear.org). This website is packed with information for adults and kids.

Electric fencing kits are sold for bears, especially to be used for temporary installations at campsites or seasonal homes. These generally are sought by those who anticipate encounters with brown bears, but they would work on the smaller black bears as well.

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