

Waltzing with Bears


REKINDLING AN OLD FELLOWSHIP

By Philip Johnson



We bought Uncle Walter a new coat to wear
But when he came home it was covered with hair.

And lately I've noticed several new tears
I'm sure Uncle Walter's been waltzing with bears.

 Dale Marxen

Robin Brckman Illustration

The first black bear I saw was in no mood for waltzing. That was 10 years ago, a half-mile off the Appalachian Trail, near the top of Mt. Abraham, Vt. Struggling from my sleeping bag, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I was face to face with a bear as big as my tent. He was at least as surprised to find me there, and hurried along on his original tangent with the colossal sound of the Earth Mother eating Grape Nuts.

This year I had a very different experience, in my own back yard. I saw the bear gamboling across the road by my driveway, hesitating to check my license plate; I found his tracks climbing my woodpile, circling the garden, and snorkeling around the compost bin. This was no wilderness bear. This was an opportunistic young wanderer, a harbinger of things to come.

Black bears are on the rise in the northeastern woodlands. "Nuisance" bears are greeting hikers and campers in southern New Hampshire with increasing frequency, getting bolder with every \$300 backpack they eviscerate. They're waltzing into suburbs of Harrisburg, Pa., where they have been missing for nearly two centuries. And a new and growing population in western New York is throwing fiestas in local corn fields. This is either the era of the 200-pound natural disaster or the most opportune moment for a new peaceful coexistence. I'd like to put my money on the latter.

Black bears in the Northeast number from 36,000 to 38,000, a small fraction of the perhaps 500,000 populating North America. They're found wherever large tracts of forest remain, from Minnesota to California to Florida, and are in sufficient numbers to be hunted legally in 28 states. More than half of the northeastern population dwells in Maine, where 21,000 roam the wild tracts of woodland and wetland as they have for centuries.

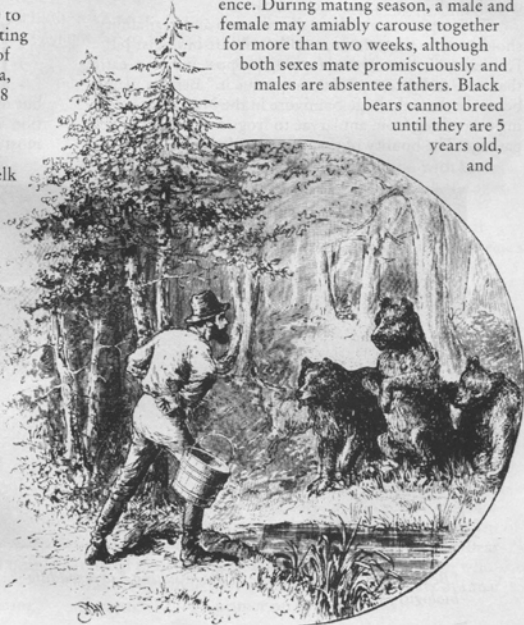
That black bears are still here at all — unlike the elk and the wolf and the mountain lion — is testimony to their standing as a great American survivor. In the prophetic words of an early American naturalist, W.T. Hornaday, the black bear "will not be exterminated from the fauna of the U.S. until Washington is wrecked by Anarchists." Based on the evidence, I lay my odds on the bears.

Native Americans hunted bears in pre-Colonial times, in the winter when deer and elk were lean. But the arrival of colonists, who encountered black bears from the coast to the mountain tops, marked the beginning of a more systematic and relentless variety of persecution. Folks just didn't seem to think the woods were big enough to share with bears. The Colonial government offered bounties for bear paws, and state governments continued the practice well into the 20th century.

But the decline of black bears was only partially due to the iniquities of hunters. People proved not only their most dangerous predators, but ruthless competitors for land resources as well. The clearcutting of the Appalachian forests for timber and farmland, peaking in coastal areas in the early 1800s and in remote Vermont and New Hampshire by 1900, destroyed habitat vital to the bears. With the swipe of an ax, settlers turned landscape that was 90 percent forest into 70 to 90 percent pasture and agricultural land. Based on population estimates from historic records, black bears hit their lowest numbers in the Northeast near the turn of the century, when they were considered rare. Their steady comeback has followed the forest's rebound since the turn of the century, and has only recently benefited from more conservative hunting laws. The Maine population has doubled over the last decade; Pennsylvania's has tripled in two decades.

Success, in black bears as in humans, is measured in leisure time. The black bear's survival does not depend on boom-or-bust frenzied procreation, but on longevity, eating, parental investment, and a keen knowledge developed through years of experience. During mating season, a male and female may amiably carouse together for more than two weeks, although

both sexes mate promiscuously and males are absentee fathers. Black bears cannot breed until they are 5 years old, and



From Canoe and Camera, by Thomas Sedgwick Steele, 1882.

females only every two years after that. Pregnant females give birth in their den, and nurse their cubs for the remainder of the winter. Females spend a year and a half teaching their cubs the danger and bounty of the forest, rewarding and rebuffing them like any good parents. This life history of bears, which live to the wise old age of 25 or 30 in the wild, is partly responsible for their slow return to the Northeast.

Although bears are often considered unsocial, solitary, and ill-mannered brutes, females build a lasting bond with their young female cubs. A female defends her home range from neighboring females, but will cede segments of her territory to her own female young. Males disperse when they leave their mother's tutelage and eventually establish larger territories that conveniently overlap one or more female's range.

For the most part, bears choose mutual avoidance to maintain territories. When lines cross, however, encounters are moderated by a wide range of vocalizations and gestures, including various "woofs," grunts, panting, lip-licking, jaw-popping, teeth-clicking, foot-stamping, and, on occasion, bluff charging. In circumstances of extreme local bounty, such as berry patches, beech stands, or garbage dumps, black bears are known to congregate in a mood as pleasant as any cocktail party.

The importance of food distribution and availability should not be underestimated. As wildlife biologist Jeff Fair has said, "bears have a strong purpose in life — eating, that is — and plenty of time to pursue it." Besides people, bears are the only large omnivore in the Northeast — eating everything from ant larvae to frogs to acorns to garbage. The bounty of autumn nuts elicits hyperphagia,

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otherwise known as a feeding frenzy. Gluttonous autumn bears can consume 20,000 calories a day. Black bears will then hole up in a cave or under a brush pile or a log for the winter, the leanest part of the year, while they contentedly sleep off this binge. (Black bears are not considered "true" hibernators by some doubting-Thomas authorities, although bears can miraculously drop their heart rate from 90 beats per minute to 10 beats per minute

and cut their oxygen consumption in half. Try this some time, for six months. In my opinion, bears are victims of semantics: If a ground squirrel, a "true" hibernator, weighed 200 pounds, it would not find it necessary to drop its body temperature to near freezing, either.)

For the next six months, the bears won't eat, drink, defecate, or urinate. Despite it all, they emerge in the spring refreshed, if a bit groggy. With appetites stunted as hormones come up to speed, bears nibble on early spring's fresh green herbs and young wetland shoots for the first few weeks. Once appetites return, they move on to more substantial winter-killed carrion and the abundant insects and berries of summer. Energy rises by the June breeding season, which is over in time to revisit the cycle of binge and sleep.

It's easy enough to find the human side of animals, but in the case of bears this exercise borders on self-reflection: It's as easy to see the bears within us. People are the most bear-esque of animals, intelligent, curious omnivores, with a nasty sweet tooth and a propensity to oversleep. Our shared cosmopolitan habits have made us competitors in the past, and could be the key to our coexistence in the future.

A human is uniquely endowed as a bear's alter ego, a sort of skinny, naked runt of the litter with a penchant for straight lines and flush toilets. Besides this subtle divergence, we are from the same mold: We snore in our sleep; we spank our children; we have an inordinate fondness for back-scratching and a tendency toward idle contemplation; we can be moody or taciturn; we eat garbage; and we love picnics, just like bears. We can only imagine what our hirsute wilderness cousins find in common with us. But our similarities have ideally suited bears for the veneration and denigration they have received throughout human history.

Endemic people of North America and Eurasia had a particular fascination with bears, which represented for them the powers of



Lynn Rogers

"Bears have a strong purpose in life — eating," says wildlife biologist Jeff Fair.

Black Bear

(*Ursus americanus*)

Map information: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Lynn Rogers



Size: 50-70 inches long
Females: 90-300 lbs.
Males: 150-700 lbs.
At birth: 6-12 oz.
At daylight debut: 10 lbs.

Life span: 15-30 years

Breeding age: 3-7 years old

Range: Forested areas of Alaska through all of Canada Mountainous, forested, and swampy portions of the U.S.

Territory: Females: 3-15 sq. mi.
Males: 15-100 sq. mi.

Density: 5 bears/1 sq. mi.-
1 bear/10 sq. mi.

Diet: Insects, larvae, seeds, catkins, berries, grapes, apples, acorns, beech nuts, roots, buds, tender shoots, leaves, frogs, snails, reptiles, mice, fish, crayfish, birds' eggs, carrion, honey, farm crops, garbage, etc. 80 percent plants, 20 percent animals, including occasional fawns, sheep, and pigs.

Mortality factors: Hunting, cars, starvation, dogs, porcupines.

transformation and renewal, death and rebirth, because of their annual "interment." Ancient cultures from the Algonquins of New England to the Ainu of Japan celebrated the festival of the slain bear, three days of feasting and supplicating to ritualize the ancestral eminence of bears. The Khanty and Mansi peoples of northwest Siberia still celebrate the slaying of the "Old Clawed One." Native American myths are rife with stories of bear mothers and bear sons: interspecies marriages with bears were an accepted part of their cultural ancestry, with a venerated role in the development of healing and hunting arts. Bears were part of the family.

The Great Bear in the sky of ancient peoples worked its way into Western culture in the form of Ursa Major and the Greek myths of Artemis. Beowulf is a Western version of the bear-son myth from Medieval England, and St. Blaise marks the rebirth of the year by farting just like a hibernating bear. The distinction of bears persisted in fables, folk tales, and fairy tales like Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The belief in their magical and healing powers endured from Pliny the Elder, who professed that bear grease cured balding, to one Mr. Purchase in Colonial Massachusetts who cured himself of sciatica by slathering

bear grease on his groin. But our association with bears has grown more removed, less familial, through the ages.

The bear that has straggled into this century of Western culture is a serious diminution of its original image. There is Teddy, the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt's refusal to shoot a cuddly cub in 1902. Then there are Pooh, Paddington, Smokey, Gummy, Yogi, Fozzie, and Fuzzy Wuzzy. The abasement of the bear has grown in direct proportion our modern inflated self-image as humans, and of our profound separation from the wilderness from whence we came. Our estrangement from this most familiar of beasts has never been greater, and it is nowhere more obvious than in the woods.

Visitors to black-bear habitat often anticipate encounters with eagerness but are unprepared to meet the animals on their own ground. People rarely give bears the respect they deserve for their intelligence, competence, and wildness. Injuries to visitors are rare, thanks to the magnanimous restraint practiced by black bears. Ninety percent of injuries that do occur are related to food. The only bear-related injury in New York last year was a person who was bitten while trying to hand-feed a bear bits of tuna. (See page 32 for a primer on bear relations).

The future of black bears is brighter than that of many large mammals, a virtue of its intelligence, adaptability, and staying power. Bear hunting, which is practiced in 28 of the lower 48 states, keeps populations in check. Hunting seasons are adjusted according to population growth and local management objectives: In New Hampshire the season is three months; in Pennsylvania it's three days. It's certainly not "natural" selection, but it may be the black bear's best chance for survival in the modern world.

But population management is not enough. As large omnivores, black bears need big tracts of untrammeled land and a wide range of habitats. On northeastern public lands the forests are usually managed for diversity, the black bear's middle name. But with development and forest fragmentation on the rise, habitat management on private lands will be an important factor in preserving their place in the future of the Northeast.

Vermont's pioneering Act 250 is the only state legislation that protects vital wildlife habitats from large development projects. It has successfully preserved valuable black bear habitat, including oak and beech forests, wetlands, and travel corridors, from the expansion of two ski resorts, Stratton and Killington. Neighboring New Hampshire, with its "Live Free or Die" attitude and an expanding human population angered by the pillaging of bird feeders, is decades away from such progressive legislation. Other northeastern states are not much closer.

As growing bear populations come into increasing conflict with growing human populations, the case for better education and management of people becomes ever more compelling. Gary Alt of the Pennsylvania Game Commission regularly brings local public groups into the field, instilling understanding and a sense of pride in the thriving bear population there. The New York Department of Environmental Conservation sponsors educational programs at campgrounds with frequent bear encounters. And in New Hampshire, the Fish and Game Department, the Black Bear Foundation, and the AMC sponsored a training seminar for all local conservation agencies to reach consensus on bear biology, behavior, and conflict avoidance, the key to the peaceful cohabitation of people and black bears.

It takes two to waltz, and bears have shown their willingness to coexist with us since they had their first fiesta in a Colonial corn field. The question is, can we learn to do the same?

Philip Johnson, an avid hiker, biker, and paddler, is a biologist living in Brattleboro, Vt. He wrote about black flies and mosquitoes for the July-August 1992 AMC Outdoors.

Encountering

a bear in the wilderness does not have to lead to conflict. Black bears, unlike grizzlies, are interested only in your sweet-smelling, usually accessible food. It follows that the most critical factor is the storage and handling of food at your campsite:

- Do not take any food in tent; yes, even if it's raining.
- Do not leave food scraps, garbage, dirty pans in campsite.
- Do not burn grease or food scraps in fire.
- Cook meals in different clothes than you sleep in.
- Hang your food, pots, pans, and any smelly cosmetics, toothpaste, etc., 100 feet from tent.
- Look for bear warnings at trailheads.

Techniques for hanging food are many, but the current wisdom entails double- or triple-wrapping all food to reduce odor, sprinkling cayenne pepper in the next-to-last wrapping layer for deterrent, and hanging the food on a branch 20-plus feet high and 10-plus feet from the tree trunk. The branch should be strong enough to support your food, but not a hungry, 200-pound bear.

Tying off one bag with a long rope has led to the bear insight that a flick of the claw can reap the jackpot. Any system of hanging food arouses the curiosity and acute problem-solving faculties of hungry bears. "Counterbalancing" two bags at each end of a short rope is currently regarded as the most bearproof method. It involves using a long stick to raise the second bag, and takes a lot of patience at a time when you'd rather be sleeping, but is the safest bet. Practice it at home first.

Bear-proof food canisters, used out west in grizzly country, are gaining popularity here on the East Coast, and can be rented or bought at some outdoor specialty shops. Fish and Game officials are talking about supplying storage canisters at tent and shelter sites popular with bears.

Although it is a common belief that menstruating women are attractive to bears, there is no record of this. Still, women are advised to store sanitary napkins or tampons with other garbage, and treat it accordingly.

If an obviously habituated bear is rooting around your campsite, you have several options short of bodily defense. You may be tempted to just watch, or cower in your sleeping bag, but for the bear's sake (and your breakfast's), you should take action. Clatter something noisy like a pack frame, tent



Keeping the peace

How to negotiate a meeting with bears

If the bear won't let you pass, or approaches you, it is more than likely a habituated bear. It will still back down if you make enough noise, but you may choose to back away. Do not run away or climb a tree unless you are willing to drop your pack first: There is nothing more enticing to a habituated black bear than a bright pack of food bouncing down the trail, and they can climb trees even faster than a terrified hiker.

For more information on bear encounters, or people education, call Rob Burbank, AMC Public Information coordinator, 603-466-2721.

Something you can do to help:

The Black Bear Conservation Foundation in New Hampshire is actively involved in the bear-education of backcountry visitors. Besides publishing informative brochures and bulletins, the BBCF coordinates backcountry volunteers in the White Mountain National Forest. The volunteers visit campsites and talk to campers about the presence of bears, the importance of conflict avoidance, and how to store food safely. If you are interested in volunteering in this capacity, or learning more about BBCF, contact:

Black Bear Conservation Foundation
Post Office Box 314
Center Conway, N.H. 03813
603-447-8923 or 207-925-3047

Further Reading:

Fair, Jeff. *The Great American Bear*. NorthWord Press, 1990.
Herrero, Stephen. *Bear Attacks*. Nick Lyons Books, 1985.
Shepard, Paul, and Barry Sanders. *Sacred Paw: The bear in nature, myth and literature*. Viking Press, 1985.
Conover, Adele. "He's Just One of the Bears." *National Wildlife*, June-July 1992.

— Philip Johnson

pole or fuel bottle to scare off the bear. Yelling or clapping also works, (chattering teeth are not quite loud enough). Some experts have advised throwing a few pebbles at the bear to chase it away, but this must be done with caution so as not to injure or anger the animal.

Encountering a black bear on the trail is a different matter, and requires a bit more attention to the details of its behavior. This is not necessarily a habituated bear, and most likely will shy away from you if you give it fair warning by clapping your hands, whistling, or shouting. If a bear bluff charges and slaps the ground, you are well advised to stand your ground and keep making noise, especially if you are not chewing on a stick of beef jerky at that moment. Do not under any circumstances give the bear food as a peace offering.