

Learning to live bearably

STORY AND ILLUSTRATION BY JENNIFER OSBORN

In recent weeks there has been a lot of talk about bears, black bears in particular. Properly called the American Black Bear or *Ursus americanus*, black bears are considered a medium-sized bear, measuring around three feet at the shoulder when on all fours, and weighing from 150 to 450 pounds. Although it's name is the American Black bear it can be found in both America and Canada, even into Florida and Mexico.

It is not unusual for a single bear to have a home range of 100 miles. Despite the large area a bear calls home, they don't like company. Bears generally spend most of their time alone unless it is mating season, which occurs in late May to early July. Mating takes place only every other year, but it is sometimes longer if the food supply is low. Cubs are born in January or February weighing only 8-10 ounces, or the size of a small pop from a fast food restaurant. Cubs stay with their mother for 1-1/2 years, quite a long time considering the average lifespan of a wild bear is only around 10 years, but they can live to 30 years if they are not killed.

The black bear is not always black; cinnamon, brown, and in some places white coats can be found on black bears. The white black bear is a rare subspecies and it has been found in BC rainforests among other places. Black bears have quite a large brain for their body size and are relatively intelligent. They see in colour, have an excellent long-term memory, a superior navigation sense, and an awesome sense of smell (yes, they can smell your garbage in the can even if it's tied up and sealed). The black bear has incredible endurance and stamina being able to run 30 miles per hour and can swim at least a mile and half.

During the winter black bears go

through a kind of hibernation or long sleep called a torpor. For months they sleep in their little dens without eating, drinking or going to the bathroom. Unlike other hibernating creatures like squirrels and chipmunks, bears can stay asleep for the entire winter by reducing their metabolism by almost half. It is during this seven-month hibernation that the cubs are born and they feed while the mother is hibernating.

Surprisingly, black bears have an incredibly varied diet with very little of that being meat. It is estimated that up to 95 per cent of the black bear diet is plant matter. Some common bear food would include: wild berries, wild oats,



wild fruits, dandelions, mushrooms, acorns and other nuts, clover, ant larvae, bees, hornets and corn, with only a small amount of meat and carrion (dead things).

Problems arise with black bears when they come into close contact with people. Many Canadians associate black bears with dumps because black bears will eat what is available. Old spaghetti, bread and even plastic food containers look just as good as grass and require less valuable energy to get at. It is this close contact or "habituation" to people that could potentially make a black bear

nature notes

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dangerous. Black bears are not known for attacking people – even if it's a mother bear with cubs in tow (this is a grizzly bear behaviour). Unlike the grizzly bear, the black bear is very timid, with attacks usually occurring because people crowd a bear while it feeds. Over the last 100 years, less than 40 deaths were caused by black bears in North America. Despite this, it is still best to not get close to a black bear at all. If you are lucky enough to see one there are a few precautions that should be taken. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources has these suggestions:

- Do not approach the bear to get a better look. Slowly back away while watching the bear and wait for it to leave.
- If you are near a building or car, get inside it as a precaution. If the bear was attracted to food or garbage, make sure it is removed after the bear leaves to discourage the animal from returning.

• It is important to keep dogs away from a bear. While a well-trained dog may deter a bear, a poorly trained one may only excite it, resulting in the bear following the dog back to its owner.

• If a bear is in a tree, leave it alone. Remove people and dogs from the area. The bear will usually come down and leave when it feels safe.

If a bear is trying to get at food in your yard or campsite (and a building

or a car is not within reach) or if a bear tries to approach you, here is how you should react:

• Stop. Face the bear. Do not run. If you are with others, stay together and act as a group. Make sure that the bear has a clear escape route, then yell and wave your arms to make yourself look bigger. Use a whistle or airhorn if you have one. The idea is to be aggressive and to persuade the bear to leave. This will work if the bear is still partly afraid of humans.

• If these attempts fail to frighten the bear away, slowly back away watching the bear and giving it a wide berth.

• Climbing a tree to get away from a bear may offer you little advantage as black bears are excellent tree climbers.

• A bear may stand upright to get a better view, make huffing or "popping" sounds, swat or beat the ground with its forepaws or even bluff charge. These are a bear's way of telling you that you are too close. Back off and give the bear more space. If the bear comes within range, use pepper spray if you have it.

The MNR also has a few tips to prevent bear encounters close to home:

- Put garbage out on the morning of garbage day, and not the night before
- Do not leave pet food outdoors
- Thoroughly clean outdoor grills after use

• Fill bird feeders only through the winter months

• Do not put meat, fish or sweet food (including fruit) in your composter

• Keep meat scraps in the freezer until garbage pick-up day

• Pick all ripe fruit off trees, and remove vegetables and fallen fruit from the ground

• Use electric fencing to protect valuable trees, orchards, vegetable and berry patches

With some bear smarts and respect, people can get along with bears just fine. We do have to try and remember that they were here long before us. It is up to us to change our behaviour because the black bear won't.

Farmers meet in Quebec City

SPECIAL TO THE COMPASS

World Trade Organization talks and the ongoing bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis facing Canadian producers dominated the discussions and presentations at the 2004 semi-annual meeting of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) Canada's largest national farmers organization. Farm leaders from every province and commodity sector came together in Quebec City for four days of meetings.

Throughout the week CFA President Bob Friesen, who has been leading a team of Canadian farm representatives at the WTO talks in Geneva, gave meeting delegates frequent

updates by telephone on the situation in Geneva. Delegates also received a briefing Thursday from Canada's chief WTO agriculture negotiator Steve Verheul. The CFA delegation has been supporting the Canadian negotiators efforts to gain Canada greater international market access, to bring down agricultural subsidies in major subsidizing nations like the U.S. and Europe, and to preserve Canada's right to maintain non-trade-distorting orderly marketing systems like the Canadian Wheat Board and supply management.

Delegates were pleased newly appointed Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) Minister Andrew

Mitchell was able to participate in a conference call from Geneva and speak with them. The farm leaders also welcomed the opportunity to speak in person with AAFC Deputy Minister Leonard Edwards. To both the Minister and the Deputy Minister CFA members delivered a strong message about the necessity of maintaining a strong industry-government partnership and ensuring producers have a seat at the policy-making table.

The session Friday afternoon was dedicated to a discussion of issues surrounding the BSE crisis. Canadian Cattlemens Association (CCA) President Stan Eby was present to share

ideas and offer the perspective of his organization. Farm leaders talked about the need to increase processing capability, address the income crisis facing producers, diversify Canada's international markets for the cattle industry, and deal with pressing issues surrounding beef and dairy herd populations.

"Realistically, at this point we can't base our plans on an open border," said Laurent Pellerin, CFA First Vice-President. "Industry groups need to work together to arrive at a plan to present to governments to ensure the survival of our cattle and ruminant producers while Canada works to reopen borders."