

The Nova Scotia Black Bear-Are They a Menace?

Nova Scotia's forests are home to one of North America's most misunderstood creatures, an animal so often feared that upon sight it sends shivers into people's hearts and provokes anger, outrage and sometimes even violence. Why is it the black bear evokes this fear and hatred from so many?

The black bear is becoming a more common sight in Nova Scotia; with possible reasons for this increase ranging from human occupancy of bear habitat, increased fragmentation of wilderness areas, and poor waste management practices. It is a known fact that there has never been an attack on a human by a black bear in Nova Scotia, despite thousands of occurrences of bear/human interactions each year. Regardless of their historically well-documented restraint around the Nova Scotia public, many animals are killed or relocated every year in an attempt to protect people and their property.

Co-existence is not an option for many residents who see the black bear as a killer and a threat. If bears have never hurt anyone in this province since recorded history, then why do people have such a fear and what creates the illusion of danger? Is it the result of the movies, publications and media, which has for years depicted the bear as a menacing animal of jaws and claws. Or is it an innate fear of the unknown which humans have that is preventing a smooth transition for co-existence with bears? What is true about black bears is that they are masters of adaptation, nature's ultimate food finders, and animals which have evolved to avoid conflict to survive.

Bears are special creatures in that they require unspoiled habitat to exist, representing the health of a strong and productive ecosystem. Nova Scotia's small size has made this province vulnerable to the exploits of human development and progression. We change habitat, mold it to suit our needs and are oblivious to the environmental changes that don't affect us. We often complain if something does affect us, but rarely identify solutions and tend to prefer immediate fixes to a problem, yet the true solution may be tolerance. This is the case with black bears. Humans relish the privilege to enjoy large house lots bordering wild natural places without accepting nature and her creatures. The black bear is one of these unaccepted creatures, an animal driven by its need to find food to survive and pass on its genes to the next generation.

During times of natural food scarcity, black bears may detect any aroma or food as possible forage, whether it is a compost bin full of steak bones and pizza crust, or a garbage can full of candy wrappers. However, it is well documented that bears do prefer and seek out ripe natural foods, such as huckleberries and sarsaparilla, over the most tempting of human offerings, and that the window for potential bear problems is really just a few weeks in spring and late fall. The difference is that we can control the attractants and thus limit the occurrence of bear/human interactions around our homes. This small task can save bears' lives, prevent property damage and instill pride in a community co-existing with nature. The result of killing bears in a residential area has impacts which reach well beyond the borders of neatly manicured three-acre lots into the wilds of the Nova Scotia woods. In other words, a bear represents a home range defined by natural habitat and not by a garbage can. We attract wildlife to our properties and then wonder why they don't learn.

"That darn bear is back in my garbage again!" Is the bear really the whole problem?

"I have children and I don't want any bears around. I will shoot them if they come around again."

"He was coming after my dog and I had to shoot or he could have killed us."

"I took aim when he came to my bird feeder. The dog began to bark and I thought he was going to attack, so I fired the gun."

"I could not care a less if bears live in this province. We live here now and they have to go."

"I want this thing trapped now or I will shoot it myself. I have children and bears are potential killers."

This is a sampling of common statements from people who see bears, hear of them in their subdivisions or near their homes or cottages. Their attitudes are based solely on fear, which results in the singling out of the black bear, an animal which is only trying to adapt and survive in a landscape that we continually alter.

Ismael (Butch) Galvez