

Black Bears in Nova Scotia: **Denizen of the Forest or Recycling Box Junkie**

A few years ago, my husband and I were canoeing at the south end of Kejimikujik Lake when we noticed an animal swimming in the water ahead of us. As we paddled closer to the animal, it turned and looked at us and we realized it was a black bear. The bear swam to the nearby shore, shook itself off upon leaving the water, and then turned to look at us before heading into the adjacent forest. Needless to say, we were both thrilled to have seen a bear in its natural habitat.

The only bear species native to Nova Scotia is the black bear. It is the smallest member of the bear family and can be found throughout the province, although it tends to be more common in the western end. Adult black bears range in size from 120 to 200 kilograms, with the males being larger than the females, and they stand approximately 1 meter high at the shoulder and are almost 2 meters long. Black bears, particularly males, have fairly extensive home ranges and can travel great distances in search of food. They are opportunistic omnivores who take advantage of any readily available food source; including berries, apples, buds, fish, birds, eggs, insects and larvae. Vegetable matter makes up more than 80% of their annual diet. Their sensitive noses can pick up the smell of decaying meat or plant material from over 1.5 kilometers away. As food gets scarce in the late fall and temperatures drop, bears find a den to hibernate in during the winter months. Every two years, adult female bears give birth to their young while in the den. When the weather becomes warmer and days longer in early spring, the bears leave their dens and after a few weeks of lethargy, start actively foraging for food.

It is generally in late spring or early summer that bears tend to be a problem around human settlements in Nova Scotia. There are two reasons for this; juvenile bears (1.5 yrs.) are abandoned by the adult females at this time and have to forage on their own, and natural foods are not plentiful until later in the summer. Bears may start roaming around communities upsetting recycling boxes, digging in compost bins and raiding bird feeders, or breaking into empty camps and cottages looking for edible items.

During the last few years, nuisance complaints about black bears have exploded in some areas of the province, in particular, Halifax and Lunenburg counties. New subdivisions are being developed in what was formally forested wilderness at an increasing rate. These new communities often border forests, the streets may be separated with green belts and houses are built on large treed lots. This land mosaic provides lots of travel routes for bears to utilize in their search for food. Compounding this problem of urban expansion is the improper use of compost bins and recycling boxes. Meat and fish scraps should not be put in composts because of the associated smells and they should be turned often to aid in decomposition. Any kitchen wastes that are likely to develop strong odors (i.e. meat, fish, strong smelling fruit, etc.) should be frozen until the morning of pick up before putting them in a recycling box. Proper management of household wastes will keep down smells that may attract bears. Cottage and camp owners have to be particularly vigilant about removing garbage and keeping their properties clean because these residences can be empty for long periods. All food items should be removed when leaving a camp or cottage.

Homeowners with bear problems often request that the bear be live-trapped and removed to a remote location. Unfortunately, because of urban expansion and exploding cottage growth, remote locations are becoming increasingly rare in some areas. Because of a healthy bear population, any available bear habitat is already occupied. Adult bears are territorial and will drive off or even kill bears (males primarily) that attempt to take up residence in their space. During the last few years, black bears that were tranquilized and ear tagged before release have showed up later in other sub-divisions, many kilometers from their original release sites. They could have been forced out by existing bears or because of lack of food, decided to hit recycling boxes again.

One way that bear numbers can be managed in Nova Scotia is through hunting and snaring. Bear meat is quite tasty when prepared properly and utilizing this big game resource provides lots of recreational time for many users. The black bear hunting season in Nova Scotia generally opens the second week in September and ends after the first week in December. The bear snaring season, eligible for active fur harvesters only, is open for a shorter time period during October and November. The bag limit for both bear hunting and bear snaring is one bear per license.

Many wildlife species pass through yards that border forests and property owners have to recognize this and act accordingly. Homeowners have inadvertently contributed to the creation of nuisance bears by not keeping their properties clean and free of attractants. The black bear is a fascinating, intelligent animal that has roamed this area for many years. Through public education and sound management techniques, the Nova Scotia black bear will continue to be the “Denizen of the Forest” in this province.

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