

The Nova Scotia Black Bear-Born to be Wild (With Our Help)

It was a warm, spring day when the two yearling bears crawled out of the den with the adult female. The two young bears rolled in the snow on the ground and slid down the hill on their bellies, while the sow watched. Eventually she got up and walked down the hill towards a small brook. The cubs quickly followed and after a drink, the animals wandered down a nearby animal trail. The bears ate some fresh deer scat which they found on the path. The deer pellets contained the necessary organisms that got their digestive systems working, after being inactive all winter. Organic soil was also consumed by the animals, possibly as a digestive aid, or as a source of vitamins and nutrients. Natural foods were still scarce in the woods but the bears fed on what they could find, including alder catkins and acorns.

Eventually the surrounding forest started to green up, and the bears fed on the new growth of many plant species. They occasionally wandered close to houses built in the woods. The young bears' keen sense of smell picked up many interesting odors emanating from this area. They had vague memories of the sow visiting these houses the previous summer, while they waited in nearby trees. She had stolen a garbage bag and all three bears feasted on the bones and vegetable peelings found inside. The adult female carried out these raids many times and late at night, she had also taken the cubs into a few yards to feast on food found in green boxes.

The spring weather was cold and rainy which caused plant growth to slow. Food was scarce and the bears fed on what they could find, including the remnants of deer carcasses. The sow and the yearlings made a few nocturnal house visits, where some recycling boxes were emptied and bird seed eaten from backyard feeders. The bears particularly enjoyed the sunflower seeds, as these seeds have a higher fat content than acorns and were quite filling.

As the days grew longer, the sow became restless and irritable with the yearlings and left them alone for longer periods. She continually marked her territory with urine and tree rubs. It wasn't long before a large, adult male bear showed up to visit the female. The boar instinctively knew he had to be patient and wait for the sow to be receptive to his mating overtures, because a female bear is stimulated to ovulate only when a male bear is in attendance.

It was time for the yearling bears to leave the area as the boar would not tolerate them. The two young bears traveled many kilometers continually searching for food items. They came across another subdivision in the woods and with their sensitive noses, could smell many attractive aromas. The young female fed on a clover patch close by, but her sibling couldn't resist checking out the irresistible odors percolating from the residences. It was mid-afternoon when he wandered into a backyard, knocked over a recycling box and started devouring the contents. He could hear people talking excitedly from inside the house but ignored them while he ate. The click of a video camera was audible through an open window. When a police car drove into the driveway, the bear fled into the forest. The young male would not stay away and continued his daily visits during daylight and evening hours. The female accompanied him occasionally, but she was more hesitant and easily spooked by human sounds. The bond with her sibling weakened and she eventually wandered away from the area. One day the young male was caught in a baited culvert trap set by the local Natural Resources department. Staff

members now had to decide what to do with the yearling, and wild bears could not be kept in captivity. Remote release sites were becoming scarce because of increased human use, and for the most part, the public did not like to hear about captured bears being put down.

During the past few years, black bear complaints have exploded across the mainland of Nova Scotia. The last two years have been the busiest the Department of Natural Resources has experienced to date for handling bear problems. Bear calls usually slow down when natural fruit-bearing bushes (i.e. blueberries, raspberries, etc.), tree nuts and fruit, and other edible plants ripen by the end of July. Because of the unusually cold spring in 2004, natural food items were scarce, so bear complaints continued until the end of November that year. Berries were more abundant in 2005, but in some areas, bear calls continued into the fall.

Bear numbers appear to be higher now than in the past for many reasons. Contributing factors include a decrease in hunting pressure, changing land patterns and increased human use of bear habitat. People are also more tolerant of black bears than they were in the past. Historically, black bears have always been hunted in Nova Scotia and for many years there were bounties paid for dead animals. Mike Parker in *Guides of the North Woods* wrote about David Costley, a well known guide from the Kings County area, who between 1852 and 1922, killed over 144 bears (his registered kill number only). Costley was even given a gold medal and gold ring by Queen Victoria in honor of his exploits (he supplied the bearskins for the hats worn by the Queen's Coldstream Guards). Until 1988 there was no limit on the number of bears a person holding a big game license could take, and there was no requirement to report what was taken. Current regulations stipulate a one-bear bag limit for both hunters and bear snarers during the open season in the fall.

The public have always been concerned about human safety when black bears are in an area. Bears should always be considered dangerous, but there have only been approximately three dozen deaths by black bears in North America during the past century. There are no records of anyone even being scratched by a bear in Nova Scotia. Compare these numbers with the thousands of encounters that have occurred between bears and humans during the same period. Usually a bear runs away when approached by a human; however, yearling bears can be an exception to this rule as they tend to be more inquisitive and less fearful of people.

Research has shown that when given a choice, black bears prefer to obtain food items away from human habitation, but when food is scarce, their natural timidity is compromised. When bears do come around houses, they can sometimes be taught to leave the area. First and foremost, any food attractants on a property must be removed. If a bear still persists in visiting a site, the homeowner should yell at the animal from a safe distance (as far back as possible) and can also throw balls or water, bang pots or blow air horns/whistles at the same time. It is always important to holler at the bear while making noises, throwing balls, etc., so that the animal associates the adverse conditioning with humans. Another technique is throwing rocks or balls in the woods behind a bear, which causes the animal to believe there is another bear present. The bear will then run away to avoid an altercation. Bears can be taught that residential areas are out-of-bounds and should be avoided. Taking pictures of a raiding bear is not the answer, and it takes time and diligence on the part of homeowners to keep bears in the woods.

Although bears and humans have lived together for centuries in North America, complaints about these magnificent creatures are on the increase across the continent. It is up to us humans to stop robbing them of their wildness because of our sloppy habits. And if while out in the forest, one is lucky enough to see a bear walking along a woods trail or swimming in a lake, take time to savour the moment as it may happen only once in a lifetime.

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