

The Nova Scotia Black Bear— *Born to be Wild*

(With Our Help)

By Jenny Costelo

It was a warm, spring day when the two yearling bears crawled out of the den with their mother. The young bears rolled in the snow 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 along a nearby animal trail.

They ate some fresh deer scat which contained the necessary organisms to get their digestive systems working, after being inactive all winter. Organic soil was also consumed, possibly as a digestive aid, or as a source of vitamins and nutrients. As natural foods were still scarce in the woods, 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 the three of them had feasted on the bones and vegetable peelings found inside.



The adult female had also taken the cubs into a few yards to feast on food found in green boxes.

The spring was cold and rainy resulting in slow plant growth. 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. They particularly enjoyed the sunflower seeds from bird feeders, 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. 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 yearlings to leave the area as the boar would not tolerate them. The two young bears traveled many kilometers continually searching for food. They came across another wooded subdivision. The young female fed on a clover patch close by, but her sibling couldn't resist checking out the 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 visiting by day, and at night. 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 trap set by staff from the local DNR office. Staff now had to decide what to do with the yearling. Wild bears could not be kept in captivity and 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 2004, black bear complaints exploded throughout mainland Nova Scotia. It was DNR's busiest year to date for handling bear problems. Bear complaints usually slow down when natural food sources such as blueberries, raspberries, and tree nuts and fruit ripen at the end of July. Last year's unusually cold spring meant natural food items were scarce, and bear complaints continued until the end of November.



Bear numbers appear to be higher now than in the past for several reasons: a decrease in hunting, 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 bounties were paid for dead animals. Mike Parker, in *Guides of the North Woods*, wrote about David Costley, a well known guide

from Kings County, 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.

People are concerned about human safety around bears. Bears should always be considered dangerous, but there have been less than 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 people during the same period. Usually a bear runs away when approached by a human; however, yearling bears can be an exception as they tend to be more inquisitive and less fearful of people.

Research has shown that given a choice, black bears prefer to obtain

food away from human habitation, but when food is scarce, their natural timidness is compromised. When bears do come around houses, they can sometimes be taught to leave the area. Most importantly, any food attractants on a property must be removed.

If a bear 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 rocks or water, bang pots or blow whistles at the same time. It is always important to holler at the bear while making noises 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. 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, complaints about these magnificent creatures are on the increase across North America. It is up to us 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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