

When

Black Bears

Become a Nuisance

by Mark Pulsifer, Paul Tufts and Anthony Nette

Introduction

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are common throughout most of Nova Scotia, varying in number depending on the availability of natural food. Accordingly, nuisance bear situations arise frequently, especially in years when natural food crops are poor.



(Figure 1. American Black Bear
Ursus americanus.)

To some people, the very sight of a bear is frightening and many bear complaints are simply reports of bear sightings near settled areas. More serious and potentially dangerous situations involve bears that repeatedly come into yards or communities and destroy property as they look for food. Bears are intelligent and naturally curious in their continuous search for food. If their curiosity is rewarded by finding food, they quickly learn to seek out similar situations, hoping to reap the same rewards even if it means becoming aggressive. They may continue to return to places where they have found food as long as the food supply lasts. Further, a bear will return to these places weeks, months, or even in subsequent years, in hopes of again finding food at the same location. Depending on the nature of the problem, steps may be taken to remove whatever is attracting the bear, physically dissuade the bear from returning, move the bear, or even kill the offending animal.

Biology

American black bears are the smallest member of the bear family in North America and the only bear species native to Nova Scotia. Black bears live throughout most of the province, but are most common in the five south-western counties. The eastern black bear is recognized by its glossy black fur, tan muzzle and size. Adult males usually weigh about 200 kg (440 lbs) and females weigh about 120 kg (264 lbs). Both sexes stand about 1 m (39.4 in) high at the shoulder and are nearly 2 m (79 in) long.

Black bears eat a variety of vegetable and animal matter, including roots, berries, nuts, grasses, insects, fish, small mammals, moose or deer calves, and carrion. Although they prefer forested habitats with mixed woods and swamps, when foods in their natural habitat are in short supply, black bears will approach settled areas for food sources such as beehives, agricultural crops, livestock and domestic waste. Studies have shown that bears can detect the smell of decaying vegetable matter and carrion up to 1.5 km (1 mile) away.

Black bears do not reach sexual maturity until at least three years of age and often not until five to seven years. Females breed every second year in June or July. However, the fertilized egg does not begin to develop in the female until fall. In late fall, bears “den-up” under brush piles, roots of overturned trees or cavities under rocks. One to four (usually two) small, sightless cubs are born during winter in the den. The young bears nurse in the den until the family group emerges in spring. Cubs normally stay with their mother until they are about a year and a half old. Juveniles may travel long distances in search of food and an appropriate territory of their own where they will spend their full adult life. Studies have shown that the most common cause of death among cubs and yearlings, is starvation. Another frequent cause of death is being killed by an adult bear who is defending its territory and actually sees young wandering bears as food.

Black bears are normally shy, but can be unpredictable and dangerous, especially a female that has young. Because of their unpredictable nature, large size and strength, all bears should be treated with caution, respect and tolerance.

Legal Status

In Nova Scotia, black bears are classed as “big game” and are legally protected. Outside of the fall hunting and snaring seasons, bears can only be killed under the authority of a permit issued by the Department of Natural Resources. Normally, this permit is issued in problem situations after other preventative techniques have proven unsuccessful.

**Damage
Identification**

With their size and strength, bears can cause considerable property damage while satisfying their continual need for food. Damage occurs primarily in two forms, losses to agricultural crops, and the potentially more dangerous complaints involving bears that break into or attempt to break into camps and rural homes for food. These situations can be frequent in years when wild foods are in short supply. Each year, black bear damage to agricultural crops and private property can account for thousands of dollars.

In spring, bears have been spotted in groups as large as four or five grazing on winter wheat. Although in some cases this may not be regarded as a nuisance problem, human safety is always a concern if curious onlookers who come to watch try to approach these animals. All types of grains, fruits, and berries are relished; however, corn, oats, apple and blueberry crops are especially attractive to bears. They may break branches off apple trees and consume large amounts of fruit or crush and consume large volumes of blueberries, stems and leaves. Often the only incriminating evidence are large piles of manure left behind. In some areas bears cause considerable damage to corn by knocking down stalks and stripping off the ears.

Beehives are a favorite target of bears. Their fondness for bees and honey is well known. Unfortunately, this craving can result in the damage or loss of many hives and bees and large volumes of honey. Hives are often scattered and broken as bears eat the honey, honeycomb and bees.

Occasionally, bears kill sheep and calves in pastures. It is not uncommon for a bear to carry a lamb, sheep or calf away to a more secluded area before feeding on it. Animals killed by a bear typically have the hide peeled away from the carcass. In some situations, bears will hide their kills by pulling leaves, sticks or soil over the carcass to prevent other scavengers from feeding on the kill.

Black bears may cause structural damage to camps, outbuildings, garbage containers and composters. In spring and early summer roaming bears may also be attracted to rural bird feeders, which frequently results in damage to the feeder, and the loss of the seed. Camps and outbuildings have been severely damaged by bears pulling away boards, sheets of plywood, and breaking windows and doors in their attempts to find food. In many cases tooth and/or claw marks around window and door frames will be evident. Because these situations are in areas of human habitation, the potential for human-bear encounters and human injury is real.

Report all bear problems and or sighting of bears near communities or homes to the Department of Natural Resources.

**Preventative
Actions**

In nearly all problem bear situations, human food, crops or domestic waste is involved. The most effective way to prevent these situations is to remove (where possible) the attraction or to make it difficult to access. Once a bear has found a food source, it will likely return. In many of these situations, when preventative actions are unsuccessful and bears become more and more bold, these “spoiled” animals must be destroyed. Their continued presence would pose an increasing threat to human safety, in addition to further property or crop damage.

**Garbage
Containers,
Composters,
Dump Sites
and Camps**

If possible, bear proof garbage containers should be made of metal. If cost is a factor, suitable containers can be made of lumber with a minimum dimension of 2" x 6" and bolted together. Garbage bins should have a secure lid that cannot be easily opened by a bear. Empty bins often and inspect them frequently for signs of damage or rot. To avoid easy access by bears, keep garbage bins away from forest cover that would allow bears to get at garbage undetected. Keep vegetation cleared a few meters around a garbage bin to reduce the chances of humans and bears meeting unexpectedly. Never leave garbage lying about your property, especially around houses or camps.

When leaving camp, always take your garbage with you. If possible and appropriate, burn garbage thoroughly if it cannot be taken out. Ventilate your camp well when cooking foods and clean the stove thoroughly when finished. Foods that have long lasting smells, such as fish and bacon, should be cooked outside. Do not pour cooking fats outside, near the building. Keep barbecue grills clean and free of grease. Avoid leaving food in your camps when it is not being used.

Bears can easily break into older camps that have been structurally weakened by rot. If food must be left in a camp, make sure that all windows, doors and exterior sheathing are secure.

Do not intentionally feed food scraps to other wildlife (deer, raccoons, squirrels, birds, chipmunks) which may attract larger scavengers. If you feed household pets outdoors, make sure leftovers and spillage are removed from the deck or yard after feeding time. Avoid bird feeders in areas where bears are common. If you do use bird feeders, clean them regularly, keep seed dry to prevent spoilage and smell, and do not allow spilled seed and husks to accumulate under feeders. In some situations it may be advisable to bring feeders indoors at night, or take them down for several days in the spring until the bears' natural foods become available.

Composters present other challenges. Required by law in many areas, composters which are improperly managed attract bears because of their smells. Do not put meat or fish scraps in a composter. Proper composting requires the compost be turned often to prevent odors and to hasten decomposition. Use lime to reduce odors.

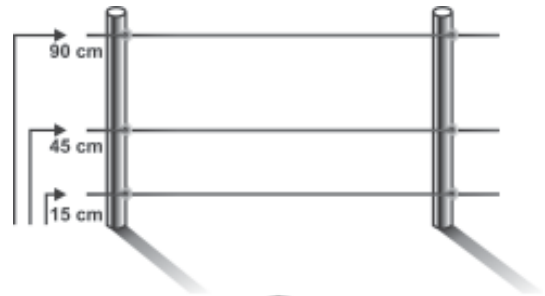
Green bins should be kept in shady but open areas, well away from adjacent forest cover. Meat, fish scraps and kitchen waste that are likely to develop a strong odor, should be frozen and put in the green bin on the morning of pick up.

Agricultural Crops

Electric fencing has proven to be an effective way to prevent damage to agricultural crops such as blueberries, corn and beehives. The cost of fencing is a good investment where large fields or hives are situated adjacent to natural bear habitat. If electric fencing may be appropriate, consider the following:

1. In large areas where fencing an entire field is impractical, try fencing areas closest to where you think the bears are coming from.
2. Clear all tall grasses and shrubs from around the fence to ensure that it works to its maximum capability.
3. Use three strands of electric wire placed at 15, 45 and 90 cm (6, 18 and 36 inch) heights (figure 2).

(*Figure 2. Electric Fence.*)



(*Figure 3. With metal straps.*)



4. If three strands of electric wire are not possible, try one strand of wire with strips of bacon draped over the wire at regular intervals. If the bears' first experience with this site is a shock and not a good meal, it may not return.

Portable electric fence units are available and very effective in protecting beehives from bears. Beekeepers who do not use electric fencing should avoid placing their apiaries near a stream, on a ridge or near a game trail, heavy forest cover, or a garbage dump.

One technique successfully used to minimize bear damage involves securing beehives between wooden pallets with metal straps or threaded rods (figure 3).

**General
Prevention
Techniques**

If the options mentioned above do not work, or are impractical, nuisance bear problems and damage may be reduced in some situations by firing a shotgun near - **but not at** - the offending animals. Specially designed shotgun shells that create unusually loud and/or frightening sounds such as high pitched whistles, or loud bangs can be used with caution. In certain circumstances these specialty shells can be a hazard, or prohibited.

In some instances, houndsmen with bear dogs may be available to chase the offending animal away. Anyone considering dogs as an option must first contact their local Department of Natural Resources office to obtain the necessary permission.

Nuisance Wildlife Operators (NWO) can be hired to trap and/or shoot a nuisance bear. These operators are licensed by DNR but require a specific permit before acting on a bear complaint. Persons interested in obtaining the services of a NWO should contact their local DNR office.

During the fall months when bear hunting and trapping seasons are in effect, the land owner could ask a licensed trapper and/or hunter to assist with the problem.

If all reasonable options have been tried and the problem persists, a nuisance wildlife permit may be issued by the Department of Natural Resources to the property owner or an agent acting on behalf of the land owner, to hunt or trap the bear.

**DNR Assistance
with Nuisance
Bears**

When all other efforts fail, DNR staff are available to assist with a variety of methods.

Removal of the bear through live trapping is possible, although seldom recommended. Relocating bears is not a good solution in most cases, even though the public often makes this request. Nova Scotia has few wilderness areas where a nuisance bear could be released and not become someone else's problem. Nova Scotia has a healthy bear population and most, if not all good bear habitats are already occupied. Adult bears are territorial and will defend their area by driving off or killing other bears.

Chemical immobilization and transfer is used mainly in situations where a bear poses a real threat to human safety and killing the bear is undesirable or dangerous. Tranquilizing and moving a bear is dangerous and is not used in most nuisance situations.

If DNR offices are aware of problem bear areas, hunters and trappers may be directed to these areas during the fall hunting and snaring seasons.

Some DNR offices have special 12 gauge shotgun shells which fire a rubber bullet designed to hurt, but not seriously injure a bear. Being hit with a rubber bullet may prevent a bear from returning.

- Safety Considerations** Bears are able to live in close proximity to human settlements and may be encountered near developed areas. Black bears are potentially dangerous and should be treated with a great deal of respect. Everyone should be aware of some basic safety rules when a bear is encountered, whether it is in your back yard or deep in the woods.
- If You See Bear...**
- Stay at a distance and position yourself so that the bear is down a wind from you. You may want to leave the area entirely. Make noise.
 - Keep dogs under control when in bear habitat.
 - When in bear habitat, make lots of noise. Some serious encounters between bears and humans occur because the bear was unaware of the approaching human. Talk, sing, carry a portable radio, wear a small bell, or rattle a pebble in a tin cup to warn a bear of your presence and give it an opportunity to leave the area.
 - A dog tied in the yard is a good early warning detection system. Bears are generally afraid of dogs and seldom hang around the vicinity of a barking dog, especially if they have not yet found food at that location.
 - Never approach a bear or offer it food.
- If You Encounter a Bear at Close Range...**
- Stay calm, speak in a firm, authoritative voice while you **back away**. Do not look the bear directly in the eyes. Try to get upwind of the animal.
 - Move away slowly while facing the animal. Do not block any escape routes for the bear. Drop something - **not food** - to distract the bear as you move away.
 - Do not make loud noises, threatening gestures or sudden moves **unless you are being attacked**.
 - Never act physically aggressive towards a bear unless your life depends on it. Although, there are no records (as of July 2002) of bear attacks on humans in Nova Scotia, the potential exists. If a bear attacks you, fight back with everything you can... and make a lot of noise. Use pepper spray if you have it with you. Don't run.
-

**Economics &
Aesthetics**

Black bears are an important big game resource providing recreation through hunting and viewing and income for trappers and guides. When properly prepared bear meat is very palatable. Black bears play an important ecological role as scavengers and occasional predators. Although some bear damage and nuisance problems will likely continue to occur, these problems can be significantly reduced by removing what has attracted the animal, using an electric fence and dealing with specific problem bears. Public education continues to be one of the most effective approaches to reducing the frequency of bear problems. It is important that we appreciate and learn how to share our environment with the black bear... one of Nova Scotia's most impressive forest species.

