

The Summer of the Bear Attacks:

What's behind the Wisconsin bears in the news?

by Lynn Rogers

Black bears became a household word in the Upper Midwest this summer after they attacked three people, two dogs, and two pigs in a small area in northwestern Wisconsin this summer. News broadcasts told and retold the stories, and I have to admit to being part of a one-hour program on Minnesota Public Radio answering questions from callers. The attack that prompted the MPR broadcast involved a 14-year-old boy sleeping alone in a small tent at the Tomahawk Boy Scout Reservation in Northwestern Wisconsin on August 10. To avoid embarrassment on the air, I gathered details from everyone I could reach with firsthand information: the boy's father, Game Warden Dave Zeug, Wildlife Manager Fred Strand, Wildlife Manager Bruce Moss, houndsman Dave Samuel, the hospital nurse, and others. Newspaper accounts made it sound like a simple predatory attack. When I learned the details, a different picture emerged. The bear probably was just making a bad mistake. Something about the tent was intensely attractive to this bear. It contained a few candy wrappers, but the bear

ignored those. Splattered grease or a spill by a previous occupant are among the many possibilities that could have made the tent attractive. Bears usually can distinguish between lingering odors and real food, but mistakes can happen. The boy was sleeping against the wall of the tent and the bear bit him from the outside. The boy screamed, but the bear hung on to the squirming bulge and dragged the tent and all its contents 78 feet down into a ravine. The tent wall probably obscured the human smell, and the tent may have smelled like food the bear was used to getting in that campground. The boy's father and a scout leader arrived throwing rocks and sticks. The bear backed away, and they helped the boy away. The bear made no attempt to follow. As soon as the people were clear, the bear resumed tearing into the tent. The hospital said the boy should make a full recovery.

About 30 miles away, on June 26. Ray Reilley was walking his dog where a mother and cubs had been seen. The dog went into the woods and came running back with an angry bear on its heels. Ray said "The dog

ran right by me and there I was face to face with that bear." Ray struck the bear and the bear hit Ray in the forehead and ran away. Black bears have fairly dull claws, so a slap to most parts of the body makes only welts because the skin is supple and can give, but the bone underneath the skin of the forehead or scalp make a solid enough surface for the claws to penetrate the skin. Ray's result: 50 stitches.

Also in Wisconsin, on May 3, Daniel Spring heard his 6-pound poodle involved in a commotion on his deck about 9:30 PM. Contrary to the newspaper account, but according to insiders, the bear was eating the dog's food, and the poodle was barking and hazing the bear. The bear grabbed the feisty poodle and bit it. Daniel came out to save the dog, and the bear bit his arm and ran off with the limp dog. Daniel got six stitches to close the punctures on his forearm.

On the heels of those unusual situations, anything that bears did made the news. So when a bear killed two pigs in a pen, it again was headlines. Black bear attacks on livestock are uncommon, but black bears are a bit of a predator, and livestock depredations are a big reason that farmers have



killed a lot of black bears over the years.

But how uncommon is it for bears to bite people? Dave Zeug, the top game warden for the portion of Wisconsin where all the attacks occurred, told me that the attacks of this summer are the only ones he's heard of in his 25 years in Wisconsin. Is it more than coincidence that the three attacks by three different bears happened in one small portion of that state? Probably not. One of the attacks was probably a mistake and the other two were defensive reactions by bears under attack by dogs and people. Is there something different about the weather or food conditions this year? Not really. Wild food conditions have been both better and worse in years past. Are the bears trying extra hard to prepare for a bad winter as one person suggested? Not likely. Nuisance activity by bears has been extra low in northeastern Minnesota just a short distance away, and there is no evidence that bears do this, anyway. The major message from all of this is that such aggressive behavior is unusual. That's what makes it news.