

*"Never get between a mother and her cubs."*

*"A bear can take your head off with a single swipe."*

*"Not all bears are Yogi and Gentle Ben."*

*"A bear gives no warning before it attacks."*

*"Don't go into the woods. There are bears in there."*



These are the warnings I grew up with. Everything I read and heard portrayed wild bears as brooding, hungry, and short-tempered. Books and magazines told and retold of killings, noting little distinction between black bears and grizzlies. I discovered from my childhood pets (snapping turtles, snakes, and such) that wildlife danger is often exaggerated, but I had no experience to help me understand bears.

My experience with bears began twenty-three years ago, in 1967, when I started working with black bears as a student aide for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. On my first day, when my boss told me that a treed bear had descended and run right past him, I couldn't imagine a threatened bear coming that close without attacking. I knew there had been bear incidents in national parks. I knew people had even been killed, and I was apprehensive.

My apprehension soon turned into fascination. I moved to Minnesota in 1968 to begin a black bear study that became my life work. I studied bears as a profession and photographed them in my off-time. Part of the fascination was the power of the bear. Bears charged or lunged at me. Bears I thought were drugged in dens sometimes turned out to be inhospitable. Bears in culvert traps slapped at the peepholes when I looked in. I thought I was having close calls and I remained cautious. But over the years I realized that not one of the hundreds of "close calls" had ended in contact. Charging bears always stopped, even when I was capturing their squawling cubs. Threatening bears always ran when I jumped at them or threw rocks. Furious bears in culvert traps became suddenly timid when I opened the door for them to escape, exiting only when they saw an escape route that was clear of people. Inhospitable bears that startled me in dens did not bite, seeming content with my undignified retreats. I became convinced that the black bear is characterized much more by restraint than by ferocity.

I still wondered about the killings by black bears (twenty-five reported across North America this century, as of this writing) until I put them in perspective. I learned from the National Center for Health Statistics that for every human death from a black bear in North America there were approximately the following numbers of deaths from other causes: seventeen from spiders, twenty-five from snakebite, sixty-seven from dogs, one hundred fifty from tornados, one hundred eighty from bees and hornets, and three hundred seventy-four from lightning. For each death from a black bear, there are over 90,000 homicides. I began to feel safer in the forest than in the city, and bears became the least of my worries. Lightning, tornados, and bees are far greater threats.

I also stopped worrying about being cuffed or bitten, even though I knew people have been scratched or nipped while crowding around panhandling black bears to feed or pet them. I knew by then that bears sometimes treat bad-mannered people the same as they do bad-mannered bears and that the resulting injuries, if any, are usually slight, due to black bears' restraint. Outright attacks are almost as rare as the killings. For example, in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness where I worked, people had spent over a million visitor-days per year, for decades, camping among the seven hundred or so bears of the area with only two attacks, both by the same bear. No campers were attacked while hazing hundreds of wayward bears out of their camps over the years. The more aggressive the people were, the more the bears retreated.

When I realized how minor the threat actually is from black bears, a new research door was opened for me—trying to study them up close like Dian Fossey did gorillas. To my surprise, black bears were more accepting of a person than I had imagined possible. At first the bears were as apprehensive of me as I initially had been of them. They expressed their discomfort with the usual lunges and bluff-threats that black bears do under those situations. I still jumped back when bears bluffed particularly convincingly at close range. Eventually, we both developed a comfort and trust that allowed the bears

to go about their peaceful activities and me to expand my attention beyond the bears themselves. Soon I was walking through the woods, day or night, watching bears forage, play, rest, and mate just a few feet away. (Males that joined estrous females were the quickest to ignore the inconsequential human.)

Technician Greg Wilker joined the North Central Forest Experiment Station research team, and together we fine-tuned methods for a formal study. Soon we and others were walking and resting with the bears for twenty-four hours at a time, recording the bears' every bite and action as they foraged, napped, nursed their cubs, and slept through the night. Suddenly, the bears were providing information I could only wonder about in my previous studies—everything from how they communicate to what forest types they seek for each seasonal need. The information is helping forest managers preserve the best bear habitat and is helping campers deal more knowledgeably with bears. The study is continuing with a new set of technician trainees each year, and I am still spending my non-study hours photographing bears across the country to illustrate the findings.

Biologist-author Jeff Fair spent several weeks with the study bears, our data files, and us. He visited bear researchers across the continent. He used his firsthand knowledge and broad perspective to good advantage in this insightful, authoritative book. I like his clever ability to weave so much solid information on the life, struggles, and disposition of the black bears into a perceptive picture of the bear's place in North America today. His chapter on Greg Wilker's day with the bear provides the best insight into a bear's daily life I've ever read. This is a book that finally gives a fair and balanced portrayal of the Great American bear.

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*Lynn Rogers  
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