

How dangerous are black bears? Can we coexist?

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Since 1967 my research has involved capturing black bears, radio-tracking them, and finally walking and sleeping with wild families to record details of how they live and raise their cubs. I have never carried a weapon and have never been seriously threatened.

Like gorillas, black bears bolster their fearsome reputation with occasional blustery bluff charges. But also like gorillas, their ferocious displays seldom end in contact, and we are learning that black bears can be added to the growing list of animals that were once feared but are now known to be mostly gentle and timid. Their aggressive displays are more ritualized expressions of apprehension than threat. Once I understood black bear body language and vocalizations, I interpreted their aggressive displays in terms of their fear rather than my fear. I responded by improving my bear manners to avoid scaring them, and their fear turned into trust – and trustworthiness. They were not the unpredictable animals I had always been warned about.

I came to trust certain wild bears to such an extent that I allowed dozens of inexperienced volunteers to walk and sleep with them day or night without a worry, even with mothers and cubs. Grandmothers, secretaries, and veteran hunters, alone or in pairs, logged hundreds of hours of observations of calm foraging behavior and tender care of cubs. The volunteers weren't panicked by occasional aggressive displays once they understood the behavior.

Our change in attitude toward black bears was not a matter of courage or recklessness. It was just a matter of keeping open minds and letting facts erase the misinformation we grew up with. Most bear stories are either exaggerations or involve incidents that are the rare exceptions. Warnings about bears usually don't distinguish between black bears and grizzly bears and are intended more to prevent liability problems than to truly educate the public. Museums typically contort the faces of mounted bears to show unnatural snarls. My lifetime of misinformation about the ferocity of bears seemed to be confirmed when I captured my first bears for study. From the confines of the live-traps, they lunged and snapped and swatted. They were scared and had no way to retreat. We learned that even the most ferocious acting black bear would make a fast retreat if the live-trap door is raised.

It remains a fact that wild black bears have killed nearly three dozen people across North America this century, but this is no longer a personal worry. My chances of being killed by a domestic dog, bees, or lightning are vastly greater. Being murdered is 90,000 times more likely. I feel safer deep in the woods with black bears than almost anywhere I can think of.

The timid, non-confrontational disposition that typifies black bears is the result of more than a million years of living among predators so powerful that black bears did not have a chance against them. Saber-toothed cats, dire wolves, and short-faced bears kept black bears near trees and ready to run or climb. The short-faced bear was the largest mammalian predator that ever lived. Worse yet, it was a long-legged bear that could easily run down any black bear foolish enough to stray into the open. Fortunately, for

black bears, none of these huge predators could climb trees. Black bears that were alert and ready to retreat without question passed on their genes, creating the black bear of today.

The last of these prehistoric predators died out only about 10,000 years ago in North America, but the nonconfrontational attitude of black bears continued to serve it well as the next round of predators – grizzly bears, timber wolves, and people – spread across the continent from Alaska and the Bering Land Bridge.

Startled black bears climb or run away without even thinking of attacking like grizzlies sometimes do. Black bears stand their ground and bluff only where circumstances like cubs, extreme hunger, or habituation to people are concerned. Black bears rarely defend carcasses against people, unlike grizzlies which have a different evolutionary history.

A big revelation to me was how seldom mothers attack people in defense of cubs. Defense of cubs is primarily a grizzly bear trait. Seventy percent of grizzly-caused deaths are by mothers with cubs, but I don't know of anyone being killed by a black bear mother.

Timid as black bears are on the ground, they sometimes show a more masterful side in trees. After all, none of the huge predators they evolved with could climb. Black bears sometimes kill each other by throwing opponents out of trees. The bear below has the advantage because the one above cannot easily hang on and face downward to fight back. The bear below seems so confident of its advantage that mothers have even come up trees after people who thought climbing was prudent.

If mother black bears with cubs are no problem, what's the story behind the killings and injuries we've heard about? I put these events into two categories – offensive attacks, which are very rare, and defensive actions, which are easily avoided.

Offensive attacks include all the killings by black bears. These are generally unprovoked, predatory attacks. Most victims were eaten. Offensive, predatory attacks have almost always been in remote areas where the bears had little or no previous contact with people. Black bears that raid campgrounds or garbage cans are almost never involved. The rarity of the killings goes along with the non-confrontational, timid disposition that's been bred into black bears. But why approximately one black bear in 600,000 becomes a killer is a mystery. None of the killers had rabies. Some had common physical problems. There is no consistent explanation.

What can you do in the rare case of being attacked by a black bear? Fight back.

Will black bears attack if they sense a person is afraid? Most people who encounter black bears close-up ARE afraid and are not attacked. The idea that bears will attack if they sense we are vulnerable is an idea conjured up out of our own fear.

What are defensive actions? Those are fearful swats or nips toward people who behave like bad mannered bears. In developing methods for close-up studies and intentionally testing their reactions to common no-no's, we have been slapped occasionally, but we found that black bears are not prone to bite unless the person initiates the contact. No

black bear has ever come after me and bit me. The slaps were not that damaging – usually ripped clothing and welts on the skin – nothing close to the folklore that a bear can disembowel a steer with a single swipe. Their claws are strong for climbing trees but not sharp for holding prey. Bears regard petting as an offensive act.

A defensive action might also result when a person uses food to lure a very hungry half-tame bear closer than it feels comfortable. The bear might feed calmly enough from the person's hand until the food is gone then suddenly feel crowded without the food distraction. Too fearful to turn its back and leave, it defensively slaps, giving itself an instant afterward to turn and run. In a related scenario, fearful people often jerk their hand back each time a bear opens its mouth to take food from it. Some bears just give up and leave, but very hungry bears sometimes try more quickly and bruise a finger.

The record is not as clean for black bears that come into campgrounds. They come because they are hungry, and they usually are not tame enough to feel truly comfortable near people. They occasionally cause minor injuries but frequently do property damage. In my experience, no matter how bold they seemed, they still recognized aggressive human behavior and always ran away when I yelled and ran toward them. For an even bigger response, watch their terror when a group yells and runs toward them.

If a bear seems to insist on staying for lunch, pepper spray in its eyes can change its mind. The spray is harmless. It's not teargas – not Mace. It's what mailmen have used on dogs for 30 years, and it works as well on bears as it does on dogs. They don't go away mad, they just go away – usually fast.

As people learn more about black bears, old fears are being replaced with understanding. Black bear numbers are rebounding in many places as fewer people shoot bears for simply showing their faces around rural cabins. Bounties on bears and other predators have ended, which means not only that bears are no longer being killed for bounty, but that countless cubs are no longer being accidentally killed in foot traps set for other predators in summer. One problem is growing; people are moving into bear country in unprecedented numbers as baby boomers buy cabins and as people move away from the economic centers to do business via computers, modems, and fax machines. The attitude of this growing rural population will determine future black bear numbers.

Can we coexist with black bears? The residents of Hemlock Farms, Pennsylvania, suggest we can. Seven thousand residents share this seven square mile town with over 20 black bears. That's three bears per square mile – a higher density than is found in any national park or national forest. The bears hibernate under people's porches and in their back yards, often without the people's knowledge says Dr. Gary Alt who is studying the situation. In the summer, the people have thousands of what are usually called "encounters." They see bears, but it's not a problem. They enjoy seeing bears.

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