

Bears Among Us

By Pamela Eyden

Mary Coughlan, an artist and teacher who lives in the forested hills outside Ettrick, Wis., sat up from a nap on her couch this summer, looked out the window and saw a black bear peeking in at her. It turned and left before she could react.

It was unnerving, but not unusual. She and her neighbors in southwestern Wisconsin have seen bears frequently in the last decade. Coughlan has seen eight different bears in the last few years — bears of recognizably different sizes and colorations, including two separate sightings of mother bears with their cubs. One bear stood on its hind legs to pull down a bird feeder, then lay on the ground to punch it open. She took photos of that one, then brought the feeders inside. One time a bear pried open a closed window on her camper van to get an empty pizza box. Another day, Coughlan was watching whitetail deer nibble grass in the yard when they stamped, jumped and bolted off into the woods. A few seconds later a bear walked down the driveway.

She describes bears with a mixture of awe, admiration and fear. “They’re beautiful. Their fur shines and ripples. They’re very fast and silent — first you don’t see anything and then — wow! — there they are!” They vanish just as quickly.

“I think there are a lot more bears than we think. Maybe they’re watching us more than we know.”

Maybe they always have.

Hungry Wanderers

There are more black bears in North America than bears of all other species over the rest of the world combined. The black bear, *Ursus americanus*, is doing very well. They have lived in the Driftless Area for longer than humans, much longer than Euro-Americans. The dense hardwood forests, swamps



A bear near Ettrick, Wis., helps itself to the goodies in a bird feeder. (Mary Coughlan)



(Herb Lange)

and hills are good habitat. There's plenty of food here — bears love berries, hazelnuts and acorns.

Effigy Mounds National Monument, in northeast Iowa, protects 20 bear-shaped effigy mounds, including a line of 10 bear mounds three to four feet high along the top of a bluff — the Marching Bear Group. The mounds were likely created in the late Woodland period, 800 to 1200 AD, by the ancestors of the Ho-Chunk people, who still live in this area.

Ho-Chunk today know and respect the bear. One of their clans is the Bear Clan, whose members are often assigned to keep order at gatherings. Native American tribes across the continent honor the bear for its power, intelligence and memory. The bear's human-like shape inspires a sense of kinship, celebrated in stories in which the tribes of bears and humans intermingle.

Euro-American settlers didn't want

them around, though. Black bears were hunted without limit, and the population dropped until the mid-1900s, when modern wildlife management took hold.

Wisconsin and Minnesota both

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manage their bear populations by adjusting the number of hunting permits, but that's not an exact science. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimates that Wisconsin's bear population was more than

30,000 in 2000. Wildlife agencies got so many calls about nuisance bears that they increased the number of hunting permits.

“It was causing property and crop damage and a lot of nuisance calls, so we adjusted our hunting limits to bring the population down, which we have done in the last few years,” said Wisconsin DNR bear specialist Jeff Pritzl. He estimates there were 28,900 in the fall of 2016 before the hunting season.

Minnesota estimates it has just 20 individual bears in the southeast part of the state (out of a total of 12,000 to 15,000 in the state), most of which probably swam across the Mississippi River, according to Minnesota DNR wildlife research biologist Andrew Tri. Bears in Iowa also probably swam over from Wisconsin.

“Bears are very strong swimmers. I've seen them swimming Lake of the Woods. The Main Channel wouldn't bother them,” said Tri.

The population boom of the 1990s pushed bears south into the Driftless Area. They likely followed the “green corridors” of the Chippewa and Black rivers south.

“In the early 1990s we started getting solid reports of bears, usually male bears traveling solo. Now we have females with cubs, too, not just tran-

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sient. The transients now are being seen in Iowa and Illinois,” said Dan Hirschert, state director of U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services in Wisconsin. Hirschert’s office handles complaints, nuisance bears and damage. The agency had to capture and relocate one bear from Ridgeway, Wis., this summer, and they have had issues with bears in La Crosse, south to Crawford County and east into the Baraboo Hills.

“I’d say the number of conflicts has doubled in the last 10 years in the southwest part of the state,” Hirschert said.

In northeast Iowa this summer a female bear with cubs was spotted in the Yellow River State Forest. Staff at Effigy Mounds and at Yellow River State Forest have reported bear scat on trails and sightings of both single bears and bears with cubs. Last year, a black bear seen roaming cornfields near Harpers Ferry was dubbed the “Iowa Corn Bear.” It was presumed to be the same bear that was hit by a truck a few days later.

Hunting Bears

Wisconsin has more black bears and more bear hunters than most states, but bear hunting is very popular all over the country. Bears are the second-most hunted big game animal on

A Bear’s Year

By November and December, black bears are tucked into shallow caves, hollow logs, burrows or rock crevices, heading into a long winter’s sleep. Baby black bears, two or three to a litter, are born while their mothers are sleeping. They fasten onto a nipple and grow strong enough to leave the den by spring.

These smart, adaptable, omnivorous animals are driven by hunger and guided by a keen sense of smell. When they run out of food in their home territories, they follow their noses. The black bear’s nasal mucosa — the part of the nose that detects scents — is about 100 times larger than humans’ and seven times more sensitive than a bloodhound’s.

In spring, hungry bears will eat greens, strip the bark from pine trees to get at the juicy layers below and won’t hesitate to chow down on winter-killed deer. Later in spring, they get protein by breaking open logs to get at stingless yellow ants, which they suck up with prehensile lips. Bears can eat enough sweet corn to create what look like crop circles in a cornfield. They’ll take mice, crayfish, bird food, dog food, candy corn, peanut butter and rotting fish. To eat choke-cherries, they pull stems through a gap between their canine teeth and molars to strip off the fruit. It takes

a lot of berries, cherries and hazelnuts to get the 20,000 to 30,000 calories an adult black bear needs each day. No wonder French voyageurs called black bears “cochons de bois” — pigs of the woods. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that female bears are called “sows” and males “boars.”

Male bears may wander far and wide looking for females. This is when most people see them. They mate in June, approximately, then part company.

Bruce Blair, area forester at Yellow River State Forest near Harpers Ferry, Iowa, said wandering bears can cover a lot of territory.

“There can be 20 callers over five or six counties, seeing the same bear in two weeks,” he said.

Attacks are exceedingly rare.

Black bears are generally reclusive and shy. “They move away usually long before they are seen.”

In late fall, bears move back toward their denning areas.

One mystery about black bears is how they manage to sleep without eating or drinking for four months. Females bear young, nurse them, then have enough energy in spring to get up and walk away. When adults wake up, they are 25 to 40 percent leaner, but have not lost muscle or strength. Researchers at the Department of Cell Biology, Neurobiology and Anatomy at the Medical College at the University of Wisconsin have studied black bears to learn more about this. In comparison, astronauts who don’t use weight-bearing muscles in space suffer severe muscle atrophy. Researchers think it has something to do with the quality of their fat. 🍯



A young bear. (Herb Lange)



Alysha Huseboe, a bow-hunter, shot this 657-pound bear 400 yards from her porch near Ettrick, Wis. (Pamela Eyden)

the continent, second only to white-tail deer. Bears are hunted for meat, fur and trophies. People also hunt just for the experience of hunting this iconic animal.

Hunters in northern Wisconsin zones on average get a permit only once every 10 years, since about 10 times as many people apply for permits than are available in any given year. In 2016, 110,000 hunters applied for 11,521 permits. In southern Wisconsin, the number of permits is about equal to the number of hunters. Minnesota sold 3,350 licenses in 2017. Southeast Minnesota is a “no quota” zone, because bears are few, and no one has gotten one, yet.

Hunters use bait to lure bears into range. Starting in late spring, they set

the bait in likely spots and replenish it as needed, sometimes every day or every other day.

“It’s like training the bear and

“Around here, for every time you see a bear, the bear has probably seen you 100 times,”

rewarding it,” said Eric Huseboe, owner of Trophy Adventures, near Ettrick, which supplies hunters with bait, attractant and other products. Their website lists 55-gallon drums

of M&Ms (\$80), chocolate-covered pretzels (\$50), peanut butter (\$125), gummy worms, granola and cookies.

Toward the end of the summer, bears shift from eating what some call a “garbage diet” — eating anything and everything — to a “fat diet” focused on acorns, hazelnuts and other natural forage that help bears gain the fat they need to survive the winter.

Wisconsin’s hunting season extends from September 1 to October 15. Huseboe thinks the hunting season should be backed up a week or two, because he sees that bears shift into their fat-gaining diet of acorns and nuts before hunting season begins.

“When acorns drop, they abandon the bait,” he said.

Both Eric and his wife Alysha are

bow hunters who love watching bears and their cubs on trail cameras.

“Trail cams are half the fun — no, three quarters,” said Alysha. “You get to know the bears and watch them all summer.”

Trophy Adventure’s business in the region really picked up when word got around that Alysha shot a 657-pound black bear just 400 yards from their porch in 2014. It was the 11th largest black bear ever shot.

“There are a lot of bears around here,” said Eric. “Fifteen years ago it was rare to see one. You’d tell people you saw a bear, and it was like you saw a sasquatch. Now it’s very common to see bears, especially during the June rut. I’d say the bear population here is growing faster than hunters can harvest them.”

Huseboe thinks the Driftless Area grows big bears because of plentiful acorns and other food, protective forests and lack of hunting pressure.

“I think there’s a world record bear here,” he said.

In late September, a woman shot a 606-pound bear in nearby Taylor, Wis.

Bear Aware

Biologists predict that people in the Driftless Area, like residents of the north woods, will get used to having bears around. Like Coughlan, we will take precautions and become “bear aware.” When she goes out into her yard or garden, she leaves two doors to her house open, in case she wants to get inside in a hurry. Her bird feeders either come down in spring or are hung very high. And she carries a marine horn when she walks in the woods.

“It’s really loud and easier to use than pepper spray. I’d never get it out of my pack in time. Besides, I’d be so excited I’d probably spray myself,” she said.

“Black bears are not as aggressive as grizzlies. Around here, for every time you see a bear, the bear has probably seen you 100 times,” said Bruce Blair, area forester at Yellow River State Forest.

See the BearSmart website to learn about becoming bear aware. 🐻 🌲

Pamela Eyden is Big River’s editor-at-large.

Things to Do on the River

- The **Canadian Pacific holiday train** features a diesel engine and boxcars festooned with Christmas lights, as well as performances by top Canadian musical talent. Bring food pantry donations.

Holiday Train Stops

- Dec. 2 Savanna, Ill., and Muscatine, Iowa
- Dec. 3 Davenport, Clinton, Bellevue and Dubuque, Iowa
- Dec. 4 Guttenberg, Marquette, Lansing, New Albin, Iowa, and La Crescent, Minn.
- Dec. 7 Tomah, Sparta and La Crosse, Wis.
- Dec. 8 Winona, Wabasha and Hastings, Minn.
- Dec. 9 Cottage Grove and St. Paul, Minn.
- Dec. 10 New Hope, Golden Valley, St. Louis Park and northeast Minneapolis, Minn.

- **St. Paul** — **Chocoholic Frolic 5K and 10K**, Harriet Island Pavilion, **Nov. 5**. Walk, jog or take a timed run through the course, stopping for chocolate along the way and indulging at the end.
- **Red Wing, Minn.** — **“Tales from the Charred Underbelly of the Yule Log”** at the Sheldon Theatre, **Dec. 16**. Kevin Kling’s wry tales of midwestern holiday and family traditions, with a few bizarre turns. Best known for commentaries on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” Kling’s performance will be accompanied by seasonal music.
- **La Crosse, Wis.** — **Rotary Holiday Lights**, from the **day after Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day**, is the largest Christmas light display in the Midwest. It includes more than three million lights and fully animated displays in Riverside Park. Features include the Rotary Lights parade, the 5K Ugly Sweater Run, live reindeer, hay and carriage rides, and breakfast with Santa. Bring food pantry donations.
- **Prairie du Chien, Wis.** — **Carp Fest** starts the **day after Christmas and culminates New Year’s Eve** with the Droppin’ of the Carp, including a bonfire, entertainment and more on St. Feriole Island. Events include an illuminated sledding hill, a torch-light ski/hike, a skating party, bowling, snow bowl football, ice fishing and Hoffman Hall Dollar Days.
- **Dubuque, Iowa** — **Dubuque Food and Wine Festival**, **Nov. 3-5**. Ticketed tastings and farm-to-table luncheon with top local chefs, restaurants and winemakers.
- **Clinton, Iowa** — **Cranksgiving 2017**, on **Nov. 11**, is a food drive on two wheels — part scavenger hunt, part food drive, part bike ride. Cranksgiving allows the bicycling community to give back to the places where we ride.
- **Davenport, Iowa** — **Sankta Lucia** in Augustana College’s Wallenberg Hall, **Dec. 12**. The Christmas Feast day celebrates Saint Lucy, who aided Christians hiding in catacombs, lighting her way with a candle-lit wreath. The traditional Swedish holiday initially was celebrated on the winter solstice. 🕯️