

Black Bears: Denizen of the Forest or Green Box Junkie

By Jenny Costelo



A few years ago, my husband and I were canoeing at the south end of Kejimikujik Lake when we noticed an animal swimming in the water ahead of us. As we paddled closer, it turned and looked at us and we realized it was a black bear. The bear swam to the nearby shore, shook itself upon leaving the water, and then turned to look at us before heading into the adjacent forest. Needless to say, we were both thrilled to have seen a bear in its natural habitat.

The only bear species native to Nova Scotia is the black bear. It is the smallest member of the bear family and can be found throughout the province, although it tends to be more common in the western end. Adult black bears range in size from 120 to 200 kg (265 - 440 lbs.), with the males being larger than the females. They stand approximately 1 m (3.2 ft.) high at the shoulder and are almost 2 m (6.5 ft.) long. Black bears, particularly males, have fairly extensive home ranges and can travel great distances in search of food. They are opportunistic omnivores who take advantage of any readily available food source, including berries, apples, buds, fish, birds, eggs, insects and larvae. Vegetable matter makes up more than 75 per cent of their annual diet. Their sensitive noses can

pick up the smell of decaying meat or plant material from over 1.5 km (a mile) away. As food gets scarce in late fall and temperatures drop, bears find a den to hibernate in during the winter months. Every two years, adult female bears give birth to their young while in the den. When the weather becomes warmer and days longer in early spring, the bears leave their dens and start foraging for food.

It is generally in late spring or early summer that bears tend to be a problem around human settlements in Nova Scotia. There are two reasons for this: juvenile bears (1.5 yrs.) are abandoned by the adult females at this time and have to forage on their own, and natural foods are not plentiful until later in the summer. Bears may start roaming around communities upsetting green boxes, digging in compost bins, raiding bird feeders, or breaking into empty camps and cottages looking for edible items.

During the last two years, nuisance complaints about black bears have exploded in some areas of the province, in particular, Halifax and Lunenburg counties. New subdivisions are being developed in what was formerly forested wilderness at an increasing rate. These new communities often border forests,



the streets may be separated with green belts and houses are built on large treed lots. This land mosaic provides lots of travel routes for bears to utilize in their search for food. Compounding this situation is the improper use of compost bins and green boxes. Meat and fish scraps should not be put in composts because of the associated smells and composts should be turned often to aid in decomposition. Any kitchen wastes that are likely to develop strong odours (i.e. meat, fish, etc.) should be frozen until the morning of pick up before putting them in a green box. Proper management of household wastes will reduce smells that may attract bears. Cottage and camp owners have to be particularly vigilant about removing garbage and keeping their properties clean because these residences are often empty for long periods. All food items should be removed when leaving a camp or cottage.

Homeowners with bear problems often request that the bear be live-trapped and moved to a remote location. Unfortunately, because of urban expansion and exploding cottage growth, remote locations are becoming increasingly rare in some areas of Nova Scotia. Because of a healthy bear population, any available bear habitat is already occupied. Adult bears (particularly males) are territorial and will drive off or even kill bears that attempt to take up residence in their space. During the past summer, two young bears that were tranquilized and ear

tagged before release showed up a week later in other sub-divisions, many kilometers from their original release sites. They could have been forced out by existing bears, or because of lack of food, decided to hit green boxes again.

One way that bear numbers can be managed in Nova Scotia is through hunting and snaring. Bear meat is quite tasty when prepared properly and utilizing this big game resource provides lots of recreational time for many users. The black bear hunting season opens the second week in September and runs until the end of the deer season. The bear snaring season runs from October 8 to November 5, 2004.

Many wildlife species pass through yards that border forests and property owners have to recognize this and act according. Homeowners have inadvertently contributed to the creation of nuisance bears by not keeping their properties clean and free of attractants. The black bear is a fascinating, intelligent animal that has roamed this area for many years. Through public education and sound management techniques, the black bear will continue to be the "Denizen of the Forest" in Nova Scotia.

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Visit this website!

<http://www.gov.ns.ca/natr/wildlife/Nuisance/bears.htm>

Discover practical steps you can take around your home or cottage, or when traveling in the woods, to avoid problems with black bears.

You'll also find a related link to **"Nuisance Wildlife,"** a series of fact sheets featuring tips on dealing with a number of species should their behaviour around your home or farm become annoying.

Similar materials can also be obtained by visiting your local DNR office.

