



## Musing

August 2021 - “Bears, Dogs, and Man”

Marty Olson, on the “Narrows” ‘tween Smith and Upper

*Ursus americanus* (Black bear), our continent’s smallest and most widely distributed bear, is common enough in the Northwoods that it’s safe to say most of you have had some sort of encounter. Long gone are the days of bear viewing at the local dump. Today’s sightings are mostly accidental. Seeing bears while travelling is quite common, as is being visited by one (or several) looking for food in bird feeders or garbage cans.

Midsummer is one of the busiest times of the year for Zack, a nuisance bear specialist for the northern half of Wisconsin. He works for the USDA Wildlife Services, fielding calls about problem bears. “We are busy because the bears are dispersing with changing family dynamics and moving around looking for food, especially ripe berries.” Being peak vacation time also increases the bear’s feeding opportunities with more garbage cans and bird feeders.

Additionally, combining more people and more bear movement will result in more people-bear encounters. Just last week, Jake and I had our first bear encounter of the summer. Walking along our very quiet dead-end paved access road, a smallish (200 lbs?) bear, ambled off a driveway just 20 feet in front of us. Fortunately, I had Jake, our blue merle doodle on a leash, and after some serious growling and barking, the bear ran off, disappearing into the woods. We surprised the bear as much as it surprised us—we must have been downwind to get that close. I can’t even imagine the end result without a leash. Zack claims the bear/dog animosity is instinctual and a leash should be essential when in bear country.

Of course, leashing your pet 100% of the time is not always practical. Most often the excellent sense of smell in both dogs and bears will prevent encounters.

But...several years ago, as I was sitting on our lakeside deck along with three dogs, a black bear quite suddenly appeared from the back side of the cabin. We saw each other at once and the quiet summer afternoon exploded into noise and action. Dirt and sawdust from the path hung in the air as the bear reversed direction. I saw splinters of soft cedar decking airborne as the 12 dog legs scrambled for traction.

My laser-focused reaction was “oh crap” or something and after extricating myself from the Adirondack chair I stumbled after the group. By the time I got down the steps and around the cabin I could see the bear was treed in a big pine about 50 yards away. All three hounds, of course, were jumping and barking around the base of the tree, occasionally glancing at the boss (me) for some instructions as to handling this situation. Thankfully, no harm was done and I was able to coax the three dogs back to the cabin. Watching the dogs carefully on the retreat, I swear the littlest one, an 11-pound Sheltie, was boldly prancing along with her tail up and her head as high as the black Shepherd’s back. I thought I heard some chanting like “we’re so tough, we’re so tough.”

In our conversation, Zack emphasized PREVENTION as a key to make bear encounters positive. Regarding garbage cans, keeping them in a closed garage or outbuilding is best, of course, but when that is not possible, then securing the can’s lid with a bungee cord or some type of ratchet strap helps. Also, since bears have such a keen sense of smell, wiping garbage cans and bags with ammonia, bleach, or Pine-Sol can help. Outdoor compost bins with vegetable scraps and garden/lawn waste are generally safe if working correctly (they’ll heat up). I made the mistake once of dumping the extra oil from a can of tuna into the compost bin, and it was destroyed that night—quite a mess! Yikes, that was not smart.

Bringing bird feeders inside at night may be helpful, but not a guaranteed prevention, since bears are not always nocturnal this time of year. Zack claimed that even hummingbird feeders get targeted by bears. Once a bear has located your bird feeders, it’s best to shut your operation down for about two weeks.

If you see a bear(s) at your site, noise is the best scare technique. A loud air horn blast or banging on pots and pans works better than yelling. Obviously, keeping your excited, barking dog and yourself indoors is imperative for safety. Bears are a normal part of our ecosystem and there is plenty of food available for them without our help. Please enjoy your sightings safely and responsibly.

If you have a persistent bear problem, Zack can be reached at (800) 228-1368. He’ll welcome your call.