

## Bear Necessities

If you read the story of the young bear shot by police in Brattleboro this week, you know why the article I wrote last month was incomplete. In June I used this space to relate the things I've seen while feeding the birds and squirrels at the Maple Shade Diner—my backyard feeding area. As soon as I'd sent the column in, I thought "I really should have said something about bears." I should have added that maintaining a dining establishment for birds and squirrels is a wholesome endeavor only as long as you're not attracting bears. The way I do this at the Maple Shade is to put seeds out only well after the sun is up, and then only the amount that my birds and squirrels can clean up thoroughly within a couple of hours.

I feel great affection for bears, and consider seeing a bear one of life's greatest thrills. One of the best things a bear fan can do is spend a day with Alcott Smith. Alcott is a retired veterinarian who now indulges his passion for wild things and wild places. He might spend enough time in the woods to be classified as feral. On an outing with Alcott, the stream of information about the natural world is continuous, but he still manages to make the experience as much visceral as intellectual. On a trip to bear country, Alcott showed our group the deep impressions made by bear feet leading to a marking tree. We saw a log cubs had scrambled over, balsam firs oozing pitch from bite marks, a bear's siesta spot . . . I had the sense of being in sacred country.

That bear paradise was in the middle of New Hampshire, and since then I've been on the lookout for the best bear habitat in my territory. I don't find it in my hometown of Dummerston. I don't find it in West Brattleboro on Heifer Hill. It's when I get well away from people—above the Hinesburg Brook in Marlboro or near Deer Park in Halifax—that I find the world Alcott introduced me to.

I know, I know, you are prepared to argue that you've seen bears in Dummerston eating your garbage, or maybe that every spring your West Brattleboro yard has visiting bears. While bears differ from individual to individual, most bears have a strong preference for the security of remote forest. I can think of two general situations that increase the likelihood of bears moving into our neighborhoods. The first is a lack of natural food. Savvy adult



bears that visit backyards during times of scarcity are likely to return to wild places just as soon as they can find food there. The second situation arises when dispersing bears can't find a territory of their own. These are often young male bears driven away by adult males that come to court their mothers and sisters. Once these youngsters leave their mothers' territories they need to find habitat not claimed by other bears—habitat that has everything they need. The needs of an animal the size of a bear are considerable. The young bear that was killed in Brattleboro was almost certainly such a fellow. He must have been thrilled to find that people seemed harmless and that there was plenty to eat near their houses. Unfortunately, he learned in the worst way that only the second assumption was true.

This young bear's fate might have been different if he had strayed northeast a bit instead. If he had made it to Hanover, he would have been in Ben Kilham's neighborhood. Ben knows bears intimately—as a surrogate mother. He has raised many bear cubs over the years, successfully releasing them into the wild. In the process he has learned a great deal about bear intelligence, personality, communication, and society. His book, *Among the Bears, Raising Orphan Cubs in the Wild*, is a must-read for all who are interested in bears. Ben often helps the Hanover authori-

ties deal with problem bears. He knows that the things that might scare people, like loud noises, don't necessarily scare bears. He is able to make bears leave using simple body language. One bear that had been causing problems in town for some time fled for good after Ben explained that HE was top bear in those parts. Using bear language, of course.

His most successful way of dealing with problem bears might have been an effective alternative to shooting the Brattleboro bear. Ben has arranged to have alternate feeding sites established for these bears, well away from people, in dense cover, and in a place where hunters won't find them. Since problem bears are already accustomed to being fed, feeding them isn't going to teach them bad habits. The sites are kept stocked until wild food becomes available again, and the bears usually wean successfully.

Naturally, as human and bear populations grow, there will be more bears that must resort to living near people.

One way to prevent these bears from becoming "nuisances that must be eliminated" is to ensure that when bears do come near our homes and businesses they aren't rewarded with food, or even encouraged by friendly overtures. As Ben Kilham notes, it just takes one bear lover feeding a bear to initiate a life of crime, a life that could well end badly. Another way to reduce conflicts is to stop spreading our homes into the remaining bear habitat. If we must live in the country, we can choose to keep our homes near roads and other houses rather than putting them at the end of long driveways in wild places.

While living close to nature can be rewarding, we need to remember that some nature does better if we keep our distance. That said, I hope that you all know the pleasure of sharing a landscape with bears, and that if you're lucky enough to see one, that it is not in your backyard.