

Bear Bedlam

I expect to find bobcat tracks in Marlboro in early February and I expect them to tell interesting stories, especially when I am out in the woods with Alcott. I don't expect bobcat tracks to lead to scenes of black bear hijinks, not in early February, but that is what they did. We did not see the bears, but, like walking into a room littered with crushed beer cans and empty pizza boxes, certain assumptions could be made.

The bobcat, busy scent-marking, picked up a snowshoe hare trail that led, as such trails often do, into a thicket of twenty-foot-tall spruce and fir. Like the hare, the bobcat trotted right in. Neither Alcott nor I were capable in the least of trotting right in. We knew we would have to work our way through to continue reading the story, so in we went. Not only can these trees grow in very companionable proximity, their rough interlaced branches grab clothes, hair and hats. Like Br'er Rabbit in his briar patch, Br'er Hare feels right at home in such fortresses. So do bobcats. And bears.

We emerged into an opening to encounter the first evidence of ursine mayhem, a decapitated and badly mauled young fir tree oozing fragrant pitch. The snow was strewn with fir needles and packed by many paws. A tuft of bear wool was caught in a spruce branch next to a butt print. As we worked our way around the periphery of the spruces there were numerous records of romping—brief sorties from the conifer grove into the surrounding woods and numerous attacks on defenseless trees.

For every track outside the spruces there were dozens more inside, so back in we went. We soon came to a small chamber with a glazed dirty floor. The lower branches of these little spruces were missing, and their bark had been lacerated floor to ceiling by clambering bears. The icy path led on to a larger chamber, in the heart of which we found a mattress of spruce boughs wrapped within a large depression in the snow—a nest for bears. The spindly trees surrounding the bed had been mauled and bitten, and several had been pulled over to form a canopy. Alcott, who estimates that he has seen the sleeping quarters of about fifty bears, had never seen bears use spruce boughs as bedding the way these bears had.

Bears often hibernate in dense young conifer stands, and I could see why. Among the spruces the air was still. The canopy closed above our heads and reduced radiant heat loss. Curled in their spruce bough bed, the bears

could peer through the thicket walls and monitor movement beyond. Any human fool enough to move into the spruces would create a racket of snapping twigs.

We returned the next day with tracker George Leoniak and Alcott's friend Nicole. On the far side of the spruces we found the place where George confirmed that three bears, all the same size (small), had charged off into the woods, likely frightened off by the hominids that stumbled into their lair the previous day. The four of us spent a couple of hours marveling at the havoc concentrated in that small area. We found no sign that the bears had eaten anything. The three bears were most likely orphaned cubs. A lack of maternal supervision may have been as much to blame for their atypical behavior as the unseasonable weather. I felt quite sorry to have chased them from their merry glade, but it was clear that the party we had interrupted had ceased to be a slumber party some days before arrived.



Bear-clawed spruces, and George

I followed their trail a week later, hoping to find evidence that they had settled down to sleep again. They led me on a circuitous route of a few miles before I lost their trail among moose tracks in a melted out hemlock stand. I have continued to search for new tracks since then, but have found none.

Lynn Rogers, the Jane Goodall of black bears, notes that northeastern bears will become active for several days at a time when the weather is warm. I hoped that these youngsters were celebrating the warm weather and have found another spruce glade to shelter in for the months that remain before bear food ripens. I will try not to worry. Bears are masters of winter survival. Despite the fact that they neither eat nor drink for several months, winter is their season of lowest mortality, with nearly all bears surviving hibernation.

It is thanks to Lynn Rogers that I have had another intimate view of winter bear behavior— Jewel and her cubs have been living on my computer monitor since late January via a den camera streaming from the wilds of Minnesota. The scene would be one of unsurpassed serenity if it weren't for the audio; the cubs keep up a near constant din. They vocalize enthusiastically when they nurse and complain with equal vigor when they aren't nursing. The cubs, tiny but growing rapidly, were seldom visible at first, always tucked in a gentle bear embrace against their mother's belly. Now, at five weeks of age, the cubs are larger and more active, and often appear on camera. According to the books, Jewel is supposed to sleep right through her cubs early months, waking only rarely to lick them. The camera reveals that Jewel is awake almost as much as any mother of two infants would be, though she has not had anything to eat since late October. She grooms the cubs, herds them against her, scratches, yawns, gazes dreamily into the camera, and occasionally crawls to the opening of the den to lick up some snow. If you imagine bear hibernation to be a snore, google bear.org and find the live stream for Jewel's den cam.



Bear nest