

Dirty Bear

What a thrill to awaken on October 30 to find the world plunged overnight into that most dazzling season, winter! Towers of fine-grained snow piled steeply on every surface. I couldn't wait to dust off my skis, apply another layer of duct tape to my boots, and head out into the splendor of it all. The same sight on the same morning, I was to learn, provoked an entirely different response in a neighbor of mine. There is no accounting for taste.

One reason I love winter is that snow records the activities of all who move through it. Since bears and snow seldom coincide, I have had few chances to slip into that intimate world of the bear. That snowy October day was to give me another chance.

I picked up the bear's trail where it crossed a road. As I set out to follow it, I held two questions in my mind: Would this bear behave as I expected a sensible bear to behave, avoiding houses and keeping to remote locations? How would a bear react to fifteen inches of snow in late October?

Once across the road, the bear took a fairly direct route, moving steadily through the woods equidistant between two visible houses. Just beyond them, he moved from a walk to a bounding lope, as if speed pre-empted stealth now that the deep woods were near.

The bear, a large, athletic creature, then headed for the summit of a ridge striding steadily upward. My own trail through the knee-deep snow showed much more awkward clambering. Bears do not move through the woods the way people move through the woods. Bears have an affinity for trees, and like other bear trails I have followed, this one zig-zagged slightly as the bear moved from the base of one tree to another. Bears also have an affinity for messes, and this bear's tracks plowed right through tangles of branches and thickets. At first I gamely followed his route, determined to experience the world from the bear's perspective, but I admit that this skier only lasted a tangle or two.

Serenaded by the fairly steady traffic on the road below the bear and I climbed through an open forest of red maple, yellow birch, and large white pines. Over the crest of the ridge another world awaited. Here the forest had been turned upside down by the December 2008 ice storm. Stripped of many branches, the surviving trees

held aloft their few feeble flags of surrender, while under the snow the former canopy flexed and snapped beneath me. In these quiet, bright woods the bear's behavior changed. The footprints that approached the first fallen tree were yellowed by the wet leaves beneath the snow; the tracks climbing on and among the branches of the tree were brown with freshly excavated earth. I ducked beneath the trunk to examine the source of the dirt, and found the bear had been digging at the tree's base.

The bear's course now wandered from one fallen tree to the next. Clean tracks turned to dirty tracks and became clean again as the bear worked his way through the woods. We were now in a beech stand, smashed by ice, but still an important source of nuts for bears. Bears in this season are in a state called hyperphagia, they need to eat constantly to gain enough weight to sleep all winter. This bear did not stop to eat. He had something else on his mind. He was looking for a place to hibernate.

Each potential shelter received some level of inspection. I followed along, running my own critique of each place: too much of a fixer-upper, not big enough, not sheltered enough, not dry enough . . . Black bears hibernate in a wide variety of shelters, including caves, tree cavities, and beneath the roots of tipped trees. Sometimes they simply curl up in a thicket of young conifers. Though I longed to learn which site would meet with the bear's approval, darkness and hunger forced me to turn back.

My questions had been answered. This bear did behave the way I expected a sensible bear to behave, traveling



straight to a remote area before settling back into the business of a bear's life. Secondly, this bear reacted to the sudden apparent arrival of winter by looking for a place to sleep. Strange but true.

The Marlboro Conservation Commission, on which I serve, has been engaged in mapping wildlife habitat connectivity, and in particular the places where animals must cross roads to move from one forested area to the next. For the suite of mammals that prefer to maintain a distance from people, the best road crossing sites are undeveloped for a quarter mile, are forested on both sides, and cut across habitat features that these animals naturally move along, like streams or ridges.

This bear crossed just where we thought he might. The road he crossed had important habitat on both sides, but no undeveloped segments a quarter mile long. The site we had marked on the map was a place where the road crossed a brook with beaver meadows and alder thickets on either side. Because there was a house right next to the wetland, wildlife moving along that corridor might, we theorized, be more likely to cross the road to the south where there was a larger gap between houses and where there was good forest cover on both sides of the road. The bear agreed. Another house would close that gap and might reduce the ease and frequency of bear movement across the landscape.

As I write this, four days later, it is still winter in Marlboro. Snow is still knee deep down along the beaver brook, and glorious in the moonlight. Somewhere, a couple of hills away, one dirty bear is most likely sleeping through it all.

