

Jewel of the Northwoods

It was 52° in the forests around Ely, Minnesota on April 3, and Jewel, the black bear, lounged in front of her den basking in the sunshine that filtered through the pines, her nose up, sampling the news of the spring morning. Minnesota had a March much like ours—too much heat and too much dry to come close to the normal ranges even for that most variable of months. By April buds had burst, wood frogs had mated, and phoebes and song sparrows had been singing for weeks. Still, there are some things that things can't be rushed by warm weather; bear cubs can only grow so fast.

I have been one of the thousands of viewers to watch Jewel and her newborn cubs thanks to den cameras placed and monitored by The North American Bear Center (NABC). They maintain two cameras at Jewel's den, one inside and one outside, and can switch the live stream from one to the other. The cameras have shared a scene of unsurpassed maternal tenderness as Jewel has attended to the noisy cubs with patient serenity. When the summery weather of mid-March arrived, Jewel began leaving the den a few times a day. Herbie and Fern, as the cubs had been named, were roly-polys then, rising onto legs only to topple off them again. Each day they have grown stronger.

On the morning of April 3, while Jewel enjoyed the sunshine, the camera inside the den showed, Herbie (or was it Fern?) clambering up the slope to the entrance, giving us close-up footage of a cubby face, and then just ears. Meanwhile, Fern (or was it Herbie?) flopped on her rear and toyed with a root. Herbie bounded clumsily back down and bounced on his sister, and the two chewed on each other and tumbled and squealed. Soon Jewel squeezed back in and settled on her belly facing the camera. The cubs turned their mock wrath on her. With remarkably dexterous paws, Jewel gathered the two cubs to her chest where she chewed on them delicately as they continued their assaults.

That afternoon my attention was drawn to the den camera again when I heard Jewel's fur brushing against the microphone as she went outside. The video stream switched to the outside camera and to Jewel regal in the sunshine. But what was this? A very small bear charged boldly, if awkwardly, to the top of the den mound behind her, another small bear in pursuit. Up and down Fern and Herbie gamboled. I watched them enjoy one of their first

outings into the fresh air and sunshine of the forest that will sustain them.

The NABC was founded by bear biologist Lynn Rogers. Lynn has spent forty years now working closely with black bears in Minnesota. Like Jane Goodall's chimps, these bears have become habituated to Lynn and the other researchers and can be followed and observed as they live their ursine lives. Lynn hopes their research will help to banish the misconceptions that foster a fear of bears—a fear that prevents bears and people from coexisting harmoniously. He reminds us that black bears honed their survival skills in an epoch ruled by Pleistocene predators—saber-toothed cats, short-faced bears, dire wolves. . . black bears that exhibited boldness and aggression were not rewarded in this milieu of carnivory, instead, black bears cultivated timidity and the ability to flee to the tree-tops. Have you seen the pictures of big bad black bears treed by territorial house cats?

Because black bears are big, well armed, and powerful, almost everyone who educates people about bears feels obliged to issue warnings and advice about how to avoid an attack. Derrieres must be covered, after all. Lynn Rogers points out that such well-intentioned offerings contribute to the fear of bears. When nervous people ask him what to do if they see a bear, he tells them it doesn't matter what they do—stare, don't stare, wave your arms and shout, run away, curl up on the ground and sob, bounce a bear cub on your knee—the bear will not attack. You might be surprised to learn that there is no record of a mother black bear killing a person to defend her cubs. Many researchers routinely handle squalling black bear cubs in the presence of unsedated mothers. If the mother stays around to watch, she may, huff nervously and make bluff charges, but will stop within 10 or 20 feet and retreat again. Even cornered bears just want to escape without incident.

Across all of North America sixty-one people have been killed by black bears since 1900. Most of these incidents occurred in remote parts of Canada or Alaska where the bears are unfamiliar with *Homo sapiens*. For perspective, consider the US Center for Disease Control study of fatal dog attacks; dogs killed 327 people during the twenty-year study period, about sixteen fatalities a year. Let's compare bears to an even more dangerous species: According to the NABC, the black bear population in North America is about 750,000. On average one of these bears kills a hu-

man every year or two. One human in 16,000 commits murder each year. Oh, would you like to guess how many bears are killed by people every year?

Sometime in the next couple of weeks Jewel, Herbie, and Fern, unwitting ambassadors, will wander from my desktop and the security of their den and into a world they must share with people. Thanks to the work of the NABC, there is a better chance that the people they meet will be happy to see them. Still, we have a long way to go before frightened (or inconvenienced) humans don't pose a major threat to bears. I hope Jewel, Herbie and Fern have inherited the full complement of wariness genes and will live long and prosper in the Minnesota sunshine.