

I have had some up-close encounters with bears.

The confrontations go back all the way to my infancy.

My mother told me that my aunt bought a teddy bear to be my crib companion. When my mother tried to lay the bear next to me in the crib, however, I took such fright that I screamed bloody murder. My mother withdrew the bear. When she tried again the next day, I reacted the same way.

My mother had no wish to terrorize me, but she wanted to show my aunt gratitude for the gift by a photo of me cuddling the bear. My mother decided to wait a month or so, by which time I may have increased in strength and acquired some bravery to accept the bear.

That month later, my mother waited until I was asleep and then slipped the bear into the crib at my side.

When my mother returned the next morning, she found me awake with a look of triumph on my flushed face. The bedcovers were all in disarray, as if after a great struggle. As for the bear, it had had its right arm torn off. Its face was gnawed and matted with spit. The bear's left ear was ripped open. The tiny round bell that had been in that ear was missing.

The next day I tinkled.

I can verify my mother's story, because I still have that teddy bear. Its right arm has been re-attached with carpet thread. The right ear is plump with its little bell inside, but the left ear, flat and limp, is empty....

In adulthood, my encounters have been with black bears.

Bears and other large animals of the woods commonly avail themselves of human-made open passages, like logging roads and portage trails.

On Minnesota-Ontario Boundary Waters trips, I would be walking a portage trail, the canoe on my shoulders, when, turning a curve, I would come upon a bear and he upon me.

The suddenness of the encounter, without a formal introduction or even a gradual coming-into-view, would unnerve both the bear and myself.

The bear would dash off in fright, whether back down the trail or into the brush, breaking branches and bouncing off trees. As for me, I would stagger back, attempt a turnabout, stumble, and usually wind up sprawled, crushed by the canoe on top of me.

A party of us *voyageurs* had just set up camp below Rebecca Falls in Quetico Provincial Park. We were to eat mostly freeze-dried rations for the week, but the outfitter had provided us with steaks for the first night. As the steaks grilled away, a light breeze off the lake wafted the odors up into the woods behind us. I happened to glance into the woods, and there, downwind, was a large black bear standing leaning against a tree sniffing. The members of our party took turns on watch through the night. The next day, we abandoned the campsite and paddled far away from sure trouble.

Another time, I was guiding a group of teenage boys through the Boundary Waters. We had tents pitched and camp set up for the week ahead. It was lunchtime.

“Don’t throw the apple cores into the woods,” I told the boys. “Bears love apples. Throw the cores in the fire pit, and we’ll burn them up tonight.”

The boys did as they were told.

Just a few minutes later, I turned to see a black bear at the fire pit, his head down in it, eating the apple cores. That bear had walked in amidst eight people in broad daylight.

I gathered up all the aluminum pots and pans and led the boys in an orchestra of cacophonous banging with spoons, until the bear ambled off, irritated but not intimidated.

“Break camp. We’re moving,” I ordered the group.

“But I just got my tent pitched in the perfect spot,” one boy protested.

“No matter,” I told him. “The bear has found us, and he’ll be back.”

And so, to our immediate inconvenience but long-term security, we broke camp and paddled off to a small island, a site not bear-proof but likely bear-free.

In all my trips to the Boundary Waters, I never lost a food pack to a bear. My rope-and-pulley suspension of the food from a high tree branch was effective.

Over the years, the black bear has become less and less fearful of the human. There have even been reported unprovoked attacks and maulings, something I would never have expected in the behavior of the black bear.

When in the woods, I never want to run into a bear, but there is near Orr an opportunity to meet bears under circumstances without troublous involvement. To which I now guide the reader....

About twenty miles from my cabin is a black bear *sanctuary*, where bears are fed daily, which feeding is on exhibit, the tourists watching from an elevated boardwalk.

“Do not feed the bears” is a common prohibition of the national parks of the West, but, in the sanctuary, the bears are fed. They are served piles of fruit-and-nut trail mix and peanuts in the shell. The all-you-can-eat buffet is spread about on split log troughs and flat boulders in the grassy lowland below the boardwalk.

The founder of the sanctuary was a logger who used to shoot nuisance bears, until, after a conversion to sympathy, he decided to feed them instead.

One of the members of the sanctuary board is a bear-hunting guide,—a paradox until you consider that the bear he feeds today will be the bear a client of his shoots tomorrow. A local told me that the guides set up their own feeding stations around the perimeter of the sanctuary to bait bears for killing. In 2016, hunters in Minnesota *harvested* (their word, sounds better than *slaughtered*) 2,641 bears.

The members of Trout Unlimited or Ducks Unlimited show dedicated concern for creatures only out of their own respective self-interest. A trout fisherman needs fish to catch, a hunter ducks to shoot. The lives of fish and fowl must be nurtured, in order for them to be taken. Some conservationists wish to preserve,—for their own consumption. It’s just a matter of stocking the meat locker.

(I don’t know how that motive can apply to bear hunting.)

Janet and I spent an evening at the black bear sanctuary.

About forty bears accepted the invitation to supper.

There was a gender segregation, the males to one side, the females with cubs to the other, something like the contemporary American family.

When we first arrived at the top of the observation boardwalk, we faced three cubs up in an elm tree, as their mothers gorged below them. The cubs needed no arboreal refuge from us harmless human spectator tourists. Awkwardly clutching the trunk or pressed into a crotch, they looked uncomfortable.

I adjudged most of the bears as obese, but then, this being late August, they are fattening up for the coming winter hibernation. Some had bellies almost dragging the ground; their general form was porcine. They were not only well-fed, they were stuffed, as, after the hunt, they might be again.

Quite strange, the volunteer docents at the sanctuary were all from Britain. No bears or bear baiting in overcivilized Great Britain anymore; not much of the wild left over there. One volunteer told me that even their native red squirrels had gone extinct, displaced and done in by imported North American gray squirrels,—the British victims of imperialistic colonialism for once.

A lady, slim and lovely, walked among the bears, replenishing the food piles at the stations. She was a principal of the sanctuary, the expert, the one who knows all the assembled bears by name. (The by-name rather than by-number indicates a personal relatedness.) She was very blonde, a Goldilocks with so many more than just the Three Bears.

Janet and I returned to the cabin in the dark. As we turned into the access road, Janet said she saw a moving black bulk ahead. Our own neighbor bear or just an after-image?

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