

Bears Give One Paws to Think

Feeders are for the Birds—or Should Be

By Roger Kingsley

Early one morning when I left the house, I noticed that our bird feeder was motioning for me to dial 911. I'm thinking...something is wrong with this picture. Bypassing the phone booth, I cautiously approached the feeder to find that it was suffering from multiple bruises and compound fractures. I offered my handkerchief as a sling, but got no response. Typical feeders...their personalities are for the birds!

The critical condition of the feeder was obviously the work of a four-legged, pitch black, muscle-bound cuss...a.k.a. black bear.

Apparently he was passing through when a whiff of birdseed slapped him across the nose. To get even, the bear probably sauntered over to introduce himself. A hearty handshake broke the feeder's glasses, and a hug split its ribcage open. As the guts spilled out, a smile from a job well done revealed canines the size of piano keys. And then, he lapped up the seed as if it was popcorn at his own theatre.

Our feeder wasn't the only fly-in restaurant that ultimately ended up listed in the obituaries that week. Autopsies performed on other feeders belonging to homeowners down in the village were ruled death by destruction as well.

One day last spring, I was crawling on my hands and knees on some deer trails through the hardhack and honeysuckle tangle of the creek bottom below the barn looking for shed antlers, when I came face-to-face with a bear's nest carved into the loamy soil. The close quarters reeked of bear scat, and the coiled high piles of it were scattered along both his



exit and entryways. Yikes! I shifted my rear end into reverse and backed out of there as if I'd just robbed the bank and the sirens were wailing.

Bears are a rare occurrence on our farm. In recent years, though, sightings have become more frequent, and I'll bet you village folks will attest. Used to be we'd never see one, then it became at least one sighting per year, now it's a few every year. That's not including the ones we don't see, but left a business card in the form of tracks, dung, or... mortally wounded feeders.

Usually, more sightings are a result of more members of that species sharing the habitat. When food and space become too close for comfort, bears—in this case—wander farther looking for easy grub. This expanding range has been documented in the Pennsylvania Game Commission's annual harvest data. These wanderings take them to

the outskirts of your place and mine, where enticing odors have booked first-class seats aboard thermals.

Bears that find an easy meal or a couple licks at the start of the odors may decide to check in to...Your-Neck-of-the-Woods Motel, just like the one did at my place at the corner of Hardhack and Honeysuckle. An expensive study would probably reveal that the folks without the feeders and odors would turn out to be the folks without the nuisance complaints. Not doing the study would save taxpayer dollars by just calling it a no-brainer.

A bear's nose is his steering wheel, so putting up roadblocks is a common-sense approach to putting the brakes on a visitation. The best advice from the Pennsylvania Game Commission to avoid conflicts with bears is to keep feeders intended for birds—like mine was—empty until most bears are in

hibernation. If that advice goes over like a lead balloon, go ahead and fill them up, but erect them in a detachable fashion so you can bring them indoors when the sun goes down.

Suspending them way out of reach works too, but then you up the odds of inflicting yourself with multiple bruises and fractures just to fill it. Treat Lassie's dog dish, kitchen scraps, the Char-Broil grill and so on the same way—get rid of the smells, and you'll get rid of the bear.

Folks who purposely provide food or garbage to feed bears are pulling a foolish, dangerous, and unlawful stunt. First thing you know the bears will be on the front porch begging for super-sized portions, and the second thing you know, they'll come between you and the porch while you're out playing with the kids or conquering yard chores.

Hopefully you know the drill—if attacked, fall to the ground and play dead. Yeah, right! Easy for the writer to say. Kind of hard to fake it when you're getting scalped from claws and chewed


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on by jaws. Seriously, though, experts say ending up in that situation is highly unlikely if you've done your part to avoid such encounters.

Professionals who manage the species and check stations that record data affirm that Pennsylvania is well-suited and well-known for its abundance of big bears. Our state's climate and food sources get the credit. Age and plentiful food build big bones and fat reserves that make heads big and scales groan. These attributes are also the reason the Boone and Crockett Club (the national records-keeping organization for North American big game) predicts a new world's record black bear could easily come from Pennsylvania.


The other day I spent a few hours in the shop building a new feeder so that we can get back to enjoying our wintertime birds...with a few precautions, of course. It turned out nice—almost too nice to use. But that's silly, because I built it for a reason. And it all started when I left the house early one morning and noticed that our bird feeder was motioning for me to dial 911. 📞



Roger Kingsley, a contributor to Mountain Home, lives on a farm in Columbia Cross Roads. A hunter, photographer, and writer, his articles and photos have appeared in, among others, Country, Deer & Deer Hunting, Quality Whitetails, Pennsylvania Game News, and Farm & Ranch magazines.






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