

A Bear Story

In the past ten years or so eastern black bears have been making their presence known throughout Connecticut once again. For the most part there are few if any real confrontations between bears and humans, with the main potential for trouble coming if someone or something comes physically between a sow and her cub.

Today we have conservation officers who tag, monitor and if necessary, relocate our bear population. We in the rugged uplands of northwestern Connecticut look askance at the State's seemingly blasé attitude of assuming that there is nothing but primeval forest devoid of human activity in the northern portion of Litchfield County, making the area the prime destination of bears needing relocation. Let me tell about an incident that happened two years ago involving my next-door neighbor:

Tim Hill is a conservation officer in the Environmental Protection Agency, and as such is involved in a long list of duties, just one of which concerns the bear population, and on one occasion that I know of, Tim must have thought that he had bitten off more than he could chew. A bear in the Torrington area became a nuisance, so the EPA was called in to get rid of the bear. Tim said to his co-workers "Let's release him in the Algonquin Forest. My house is right on the boundary, and my four year old son, Warren would love to see a big bear up close." So the bear, safely housed within a strong cage, was brought to Colebrook, where the truck came to a halt at the end of the Hill's driveway, and Warren and his mother, Jen came out to have a look. Warren was impressed, if his mother wasn't. A few minutes later the State vehicle proceeded a couple of hundred yards into the forest and released the large male bear, who wasted little time in making off into the woods. Poor Tim got an earful about the policy of releasing bears from elsewhere in the state in her backyard (literally), although I don't know whether or not Warren's opinion was solicited. As it turned out, none of us in the immediate vicinity had anything to worry about, as the bear showed up in his old stomping grounds back in Torrington within two days.

Here is an account that I ran across in an old publication recently relating an incident that was reported in the "Connecticut Journal" of July 5, 1766. The account was taken from a man who was an active participant and eyewitness to part of the scene, which happened at Bethany, about twelve miles from New Haven.

"He says that on the morning of the eighth of April 1766, his brother missed a three weeks old calf, which was housed the night before in a small building. It appeared that a bear tried to get under the sill of the door by removing two or three bushels of dirt, but some stone hindered his passage that way; upon this disappointment, he changed his measures, and worked against the door with so much strength that he drew 6 ten penny nails out of the wooden hinges and ketch of the latch. 'Tis supposed he did this by putting his paws under the door and prying and pushing, by which means he got in and carried off the best of two calves, a great part of which was found in a swamp about half a mile from the house. "Twas observed that the track of the bear was plain, but no appearance of his dragging the calf along the ground, so that he must have carried it on his back. While people were looking for the calf, a favorite old dog, called Beaver, suddenly left his master and soon after returned wounded, supposed in an engagement with the bear."

“On a morning about a fortnight afterwards, the bear was discovered eating a lamb about a mile and a half from the other place. After he was scared from thence by dogs who lugged him, ‘tis said that he was three times driven from a flock of sheep about four miles from the last place. He then destroyed a hive of bees at another place. About four days after this performance he returned to the dwelling house near which he seized the calf, and at night un-nailed the wooden bars that defended the window of a milk room, got in and feasted on a tray of milk, turned another over and spilt it, then took up a punch bowl containing about three quarts of cream, carefully carried it through the window, near fifteen feet from the house, without spilling; and after he had drunk or lapped it, genteelly turned the bowl bottom upwards (as if he had drunk a dish of tea for breakfast) and left it whole. The noise occasioned by the bear’s returning out of the window (which to be sure must have been greater than the noise occasioned by getting in) disturbed the man and his wife, who got up to discover the cause. They soon found where the robber got in; and both together putting their heads out of a window under which the bear happened to be, he rose up, like a lion rampant, and struck at them with his paws. The woman screamed, the man shuddered, got his gun and loaded it.

The bear was then climbing over the rails of a fence. The man shot, the bear roared and made off. The man then sent an express for his brother (the author of this story) who soon appeared with a good gun and his young dog Drover. After hunting a while, they discovered the bear lying in a swamp. Drover (who had never before seen a bear) made towards him with a kind of half courage, as if unwilling to be thought a coward, at the same time prudently determining to do nothing rashly. ‘Twas now remarked that brave old Beaver, instead of running at the bear, attacked Drover and prevented him showing how much he dared to do. This uncommon and seemingly strange behavior of Beaver (since it allowed their actions to speak louder than words) was reasonably imputed to a natural jealousy, lest Drover should have the honor of disabling bruin, which Beaver seemed sensible he had done before, and therefore claimed and strove to maintain the respect due to his merit.”

“Drover’s master then shot, the bear groaned hideously, and both dogs fell on him, who at last forced him to take shelter in a tree. There he was suffered to remain till daylight, when another shot brought him to the ground. His carcass weighed 162 lbs. and it appeared that six bullets had been shot through at three charges. Let it here be supposed that he was wounded once for killing the calf, once for eating the lamb and once for destroying the beehive. For lapping the milk, oversetting the rest, stealing the cream and damaging a garden, he was worried by the dogs. Several punishments for different crimes, all of which the same bear was judged guilty of, and thus suffered for. His body was quartered and partly eaten at Bethany, and the remainder brought to New Haven as a rarity.”

Historic Bytes

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