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## Bear tales sound tall but are true

**Cottagers almost blasé as black bears become ever more resourceful in their quest for food**

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When it comes to bear tales, it's hard to top Mike Chonko.

A bear ate his truck.

After breaking into the truck's cab in the summer of 2004, a bear cub fought, clawed, chewed and busted his way out the back window, leaving more than \$10,000 worth of damage in his wake.

"It was a Chevy bear trap," laments Chonko, who was alerted to the intruder by the honking of the Silverado's horn. "You have no idea the power of a small bear."

All of the cottagers on Kennisis Lake know this tale – it is told around fires late at night – and it is stories about bears, not ghosts, that keep the little ones awake at night and give cottagers bragging rights.

Bears in cars, bears in the garbage, bears on the deck, bears strolling by the hot tub, bears up trees and down on the dock.

And they're not made-up tales.

*Ursus Americanus*, the North American black bear, is as ubiquitous in cottage country as blue-berries and canoes. Although bears usually dine on nuts, berries and plant shoots in the wild, their phenomenal sense of smell has drawn them into the trash bags and picnic baskets of humans for the easy pickings. And, because of their poor eyesight, they can sometimes get perilously close to people before they know it – causing shock for both sides.

Gino Ariano thinks his wife might have picked up something tasty from Tim Hortons on the way to the cottage, four years ago, because a bear tried to get into her red Mercedes as it was parked overnight beside their Haliburton cottage.

The bear had actually got the car door open – it has a handle that pulls out – when someone in the cottage heard rustling in the dead of night



VIVIAN WIGGINS PHOTO

Vivian Wiggins and her husband Bill have had many visitors to their Haliburton property, including this cub that sniffed Vivian's knee while eyeing her lunch. "We've always had lots of bears," Bill says nonchalantly.

### What do you do when you meet a bear?

"Never run. The fear is that this could trigger an aggressive response." That's the expert advice of Martyn Obbard, research scientist with the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Most encounters with black bears are accidental, with the animal just as surprised as you are, he says. The best response: "Make yourself tall" and back away quietly.

When you are out and

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and went out for a look.

"We all panicked," Ariano says. "We managed to scare him away. Now, we lock the cars at night."

There was no food in the car, just the smell, he says, but it was enough to entice a hungry bear.

At Ontario.ca/bearwise, the Ministry of Natural Resources Bear Wise website, you'll find tips such as making noise so they can avoid you, freezing meat and food scraps, keeping your barbecue burning after you've finished cooking to eradicate food smells, and using round door handles and doors that pull out, not push in. A prime one: Don't leave your garbage out.

In spite of these precautions, the bears still come visiting.

Ministry officials say cottage country is becoming more densely populated with people living there year-round. They put blue boxes, filled with stinky pizza boxes and tuna tins, out on the deck and cook on gas barbecues, sending tantalizing smells into the nearby forests.

Bill Wiggins had just taken some burgers off the barbecue when a bear came out of the forest, climbed a tree, walked over the roof, climbed back down another tree and stuck his paw on the still-hot grill.

"We've always had lots of bears," he says nonchalantly of his Haliburton cottage.

But there was reason to worry the day his wife Vivian took her lunch down to the water's edge and a bear cub "sniffed her knee."

Wiggins says the valiant Vivian got her camera and took a picture of the 75-pounder. The photo hangs in a place of pride in their cottage.

John Cunerty wondered why his brother-in-law, Justin Anis, was insistently whispering his name from out on the deck one afternoon. When Cunerty finally looked out the window, he spied a 400-pound black bear strolling by Anis, who was trapped in the hot tub with the bear between him and the cottage.

"I had all sorts of things going through my head," Anis recalls. "I didn't think I could get out of the hot tub quickly. I tried not to freak out."

The bear wandered away after a few sniffs.

Cunerty says it used to be you'd see one or two bears a year near his Haliburton cottage but now the average is seven or eight. Once, while taking the garbage to the dump, he came across a bear rummaging for food. He says the bear didn't look that big when it was down on all fours. Then she reared up.

"I set a land speed record getting to my car."

To scare away bears, Wilf McOstrich keeps a supply of firecrackers in a watertight jar beside his cottage door. He also has an air horn.

"If you clap your hands together and yell, they just continue with what they are doing," he explains.

about, make a lot of noise – "whistle and clap hands" – so the bear can avoid you in the first place, he says.

Don't get between a mother bear and her cubs, ever, he says, and be aware of your surroundings in the wild.

Sometimes bears will do "charging" behaviour, such as huffing and puffing and walking forward and back, which is your cue to calmly walk away backward.

However, if the bear skips this procedure and just starts walking toward you purposefully, he says, "you are in trouble. My advice is to fight like mad." If you can land a blow, hit the bear on the snout.

It is rare for black bears to kill people, with deaths occurring in Ontario in 2005, 1992, 1991 and 1978.

There have been two recent bear sightings in urban areas: a juvenile bear was rescued from a tree in Aurora and a woman was clawed by a bear in Sudbury. Bear Watch's Linda Wall says these incidents usually involve young male bears who have been kicked out of the cave by their mother but have not yet learned how to forage for food in the wild.

It was only after he bought his cottage 40 years ago that McOstrich found out there was a bear cave next door. He has seen so many bears over the years, he's not worried.

"To tell you the truth, I think they are scared stiff of people."

The MNR reports the bear population is constant at about 100,000. Eliminating the spring bear hunt – so that mothers weren't killed, leaving orphan cubs who couldn't fend for themselves – has still resulted in the same number of bears (6,000) being culled each year with just the fall hunt, says Martyn Obbard, research scientist with the ministry.

Also, the Sudbury incident occurred at night when there was garbage about and the bear was surprised.

*Trish Crawford*

This year, there have been 2,244 reported bear incidents – where bears are causing a problem for humans – down 200 from last year at this time. However, the numbers in Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie are up, possibly because the late spring means the bears' natural food supply is lacking.

Bears are "highly intelligent and very curious," Obbard says. He once heard of a bear that jumped on the roof of a Volkswagen Beetle, popping open its doors, to get to the food inside.

McOstrich isn't surprised. There were two bears in his area, dubbed Bonnie and Clyde, who tore a chest freezer from its chain under a cottage deck and roll it down a rocky incline until it broke open.

"When last seen, the two bandits were feasting on the freezer contents."

Brian McElwain was enjoying a cup of coffee when he spied a 200-pound black bear outside his Muskoka kitchen window.

"He was just a big teenager, looking around and sniffing. He was probably looking for black raspberries."

McElwain wasn't so calm another day on his way to Toronto when he noticed a large wooden garbage container overturned at the end of the road.

Thinking "darned teenagers," he got out to pick up the mess when he found a bear rummaging in the pile of goodies.

He scooted back into the car and a little while later called his neighbour to warn him. It wasn't unnecessary, McElwain remembers. "The bear was on my neighbour's deck, looking in the window."

Bill Jennings recalls the time kids were coming up the cottage path while a bear was at his back door. Jennings tried barking like a dog, but when that didn't work he decided he needed bigger ammunition.

"I assumed the SWAT position, turned the corner and he was 2 feet from the end of the rifle. We stared at each other for what seemed like minutes but was only a few seconds. I couldn't get back to the door and I thought I should hit it somewhere sensitive, maybe in the eye.

"But then I thought of all the Muskoka cottagers talking about the one-eyed bear. So, I hit him in the nose, and then he was shaking his head and romping off into the woods."

Even for blasé cottagers, a one-eyed bear would certainly be something to talk about.