

Peeking into the Secret Lives of Bears



Getting to know how bears interact with each other – and with humans – has been the focal point of Ben Kilham’s research. By watching bears grow and respond to their environment, Kilham has a unique insight into their behavior. Here, one bear finds out what the other has been eating.

BEN KILHAM PHOTO

Ben Kilham — the hunter, gunsmith and bear researcher from Lyme — is getting national recognition for finding out that black bears aren’t quite as solitary as we once thought.

IT’S BEEN SAID that black bears are so secretive and intelligent, when a person approaches in the woods, a bear will sometimes hide behind a tree, watching. The bear will move around the tree and watch as the unsuspecting person passes by.

Ben Kilham has actually observed this phenomenon. He’s seen black bears do many other amazing things.

He’s seen bears drag a half-rotten log into the water to use as a float. They’ll even drag the log to shore to use it another day.

He’s seen as many as three bear

cubs climb a dead tree and rock it back and forth, just to knock it over.

He’s seen how black bears will leave their scent on trees, then use those trees as signposts, telling other bears who’s been there and when, what they’ve eaten and even how to locate food sources.

He’s watched bear cubs wrestle, just to see if the other cub is trustworthy.

Kilham himself has even wrestled with full-grown black bears. And by gaining their trust, Kilham has learned much about bear behavior – things

By Eric Aldrich

that no one has known before.

Kilham's insight into bear behavior isn't just interesting trivia. It'll help people reduce their conflicts with this intelligent and amazing animal.

"As we learn more about bear behavior, we better understand these bear/human conflicts," Kilham said. "We begin to learn that it's not a nuisance bear at all. It's the way people are leaving food around and interacting with bears."

Animal Household

You've probably already heard of Ben Kilham. The Lyme resident has been featured in two National Geographic TV specials, NBC Dateline, CBS Coast to Coast, New Hampshire Crossroads, Field and Stream magazine, the Boston Globe and many others.

The attention comes from Kilham's experiences over the past few years raising and releasing two dozen cubs or yearlings that were orphaned or starving. He raises the bears, releases them back to the wild (sometimes with radio-telemetry collars) and in the process learns as much about their behavior as he can.

Kilham is specially licensed by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department to do this research.

His project, going on nine years now, evolved from the Kilham family's habit of taking all sorts of injured and orphaned wildlife into their 1812 Federal-style house in Lyme village. The critters included ravens, crows, foxes, woodchucks, beavers, porcupines, raccoons; you name it...but no bears.

Kilham's father, Lawrence Kilham, had a permit to raise these animals – and he learned a lot from them. The elder Kilham, who died last September, was a prominent microbiologist at Dartmouth Medical School and an accomplished ornithologist who authored many articles and books on birds and nature.



Kilham, who stands 6 feet, 5 inches and weighs 250 pounds, somewhat assumes the role of a bear himself as he raises orphaned cubs or starving yearlings. By roughhousing with bears, Kilham gains their trust and respect.

JEROME ROBINSON PHOTO

Hunter and Gunsmith

After attending the University of New Hampshire and earning a degree in wildlife management (despite the challenges of dyslexia), Ben Kilham worked as a gunsmith throughout the Northeast for several major firearms manufacturers. He has a U.S. patent for a safety mechanism for a pistol and has established a reputation as a specialist in pistols and restoring antique guns.

Kilham eventually returned to the family home in the Connecticut River Valley town of Lyme, where he continues his gunsmith business and enjoys hunting deer and upland game birds.

(Incidentally, Kilham's gunsmith business and passion for hunting is often left out of the articles and TV features about him. In fact, one publisher rejected Kilham's own book idea, saying the public wouldn't be able to reconcile his hunting and gunsmith business with his bear research.)

Kilham never shook his

household's interest in taking in wayward wildlife...and studying the creatures' habits.

"I was interested in the same type of research that my father had done, but I was more interested in carnivores, like coyotes and fishers," Kilham said. "I wanted to follow them through their whole life cycle. Researchers tend to work with just adult animals."

In 1992, Kilham ended up with two emaciated bear cubs – only 4 pounds in mid-April. He wanted to raise and observe them, then release them back to the wild.

"I told Dr. Normandeau (Fish and Game's executive director at the time) that I was going to make them independent animals, rather than dependent on humans, and that I would document the whole process," Kilham said.

By the time the cubs were eight months old, Kilham invited Eric Orff (Fish and Game wildlife biologist) to see the progress.

"I got to observe up close and

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Black bears will eat a wide variety of foods. Kilham has documented over 125 different plant and animal species that bears will eat. During the spring, bears seek sedges, buds and other early plants.



It's more than play time. These cubs are practicing what Kilham calls "ritualistic wrestling," in which two bears that encounter each other wrestle a little bit, on two feet, to determine whether they can trust the other.

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personal how a bear sees with its nose," Orff recalled. "I learned more in those four or five hours than I had learned in my many years of working with bears."

"Mother Bear Man"

Since then, Kilham has raised and released 24 cubs or yearlings, most of which came from New Hampshire.

Kilham starts raising the cubs in his house, feeding them various forms of synthetic milk through a bottle four times a day. When the weather warms up, and by the time the cubs are about four months old, Kilham takes the bears to a nearby fenced-in area in the woods. He has rigged a door so that the bears can come and go from the fenced area as they choose.

Kilham visits the bears here every day, sometimes spending many hours with them. He walks them daily, taking them to all sorts of places within walking distance – sometimes just for the exercise and sometimes for research. For instance, Kilham may take a bear to trees marked by other bears to see how it'll react; or he'll take a bear to a feeding area rich with acorns.

"These are not cage-raised bears," Kilham said. "They're not dependent. And in this way they become very well educated about how to get along. So, by the time they're 18-months-old, there's nothing they want better than another bear as a mate."

When they're that age, the bears are usually ready to start fattening up for the winter and disperse on their own. Kilham tries to release them where they're ranges won't overlap, though some overlap is unavoidable.

"Dispersal is a tough struggle for bears, especially for young males, because they have such a huge range," Kilham said. "They'll travel 5 to 200 miles away. Females are more likely to stay put in a much smaller home range."

Kilham releases some of the bears with radio collars so he can find them and follow their progress. Others have ear tags, and some (such as yearlings recovering from starvation) go with nothing – "bear" naked, if you will.

Privileged Position

Kilham can visit the collared bears anytime he wants. There's one five-year-old female, for instance, that he visits often for research. As Kilham approaches the bear, he'll make a few

vocalizations so she recognizes him. Then they'll exchange greetings and Kilham will see what she's doing.

This privilege has allowed Kilham to observe many little-known aspects of black bear behavior. He's been able to watch bears during all times of the year as they play, forage, prepare for denning and communicate with other bears in various ways.

By wrapping a cloth measuring tape around a bear's waist, Kilham has followed a bear's weight gain in the summer and fall, then while she's in the den during winter, and again when she emerges from the den in the spring.

"What's remarkable is the weight gain in the fall, about 100 pounds a month," he said. "That mast crop is so important because it has to help the bears get through the winter, spring and until the next mast crop comes in."

Using his gunsmithing tools and skills, Kilham has gotten good at rigging up remote cameras. The cameras catch which bears are in the area and what they're doing, such as foraging, marking trees and even napping.

Kilham has strapped his remote camera to a tree where bears were frequently feeding nearby. He aimed the camera at another tree that had



For the most part, a black bear “sees” with its nose. After sniffing out this red pine, this bear is leaving footprints, warning other bears that this turf is taken.



Kilham releases some bears with radio-telemetry collars. Signals sent from the collars help him find bears any time of the year and greatly assist his research.

BEN KILHAM PHOTOS

been marked by bears, and over a 24-hour period, found that the tree was a virtual neon sign for bears, advertising the nearby feeding place.

He found that as many as six bears were visiting the tree during that time, checking out who had been there, what they had been eating and when they were there (because the odor dissipates over time).

The People’s Bears

“He has learned a lot of things about the behavior of black bears that you won’t find in the literature,” said Kip Adams, Fish and Game’s bear project leader. “And the more we know about their behavior, the better we can manage them.”

Kilham’s finding that bears will communicate information about food sources has many implications. For one thing, it shows that trapping and relocating trouble bears is sometimes ineffective. The trapped bear may still get into trouble elsewhere, and meanwhile, other bears may continue visiting the original site if there’s still food available. Ultimately, Kilham’s finding underscores the importance of keeping human food away from black bears, Adams said.

At the outset of Kilham’s project,

Fish and Game Department officials had concerns that the bears may become habituated to humans and may essentially lose their wildness. But so far, they’ve been satisfied.

“These bears are a public resource – they belong to the people of New Hampshire and they should be wild,” Adams said. “From what we’ve seen so far, the bears he’s released seem pretty wild. If I try to approach one in the woods without Ben being present, that bear would be gone. It wouldn’t let me get near.”

And so far, the bears Kilham has released haven’t seemed any less or more humans than ordinary bears, Adams said.

Another benefit is that Kilham has focused a lot of attention on black bears, their behavior and on ways that people can avoid conflicts with them. Aside from the media attention on Kilham’s work, he has spoken to many groups around the state, showing them slides, answering questions and debunking myths about bears.

“One of the major things I’m able to say during these talks is that black bears are not as solitary as we thought they were,” Kilham said. “They’re

very much social and cooperative animals.”

As for the future, Kilham hopes his work will benefit endangered bear species, such as giant pandas. His findings and techniques for studying black bears may help refine research on the world’s rare bears.

Meanwhile, Kilham plans to continue the research and keep looking for higher levels of cooperation among bears.

“I’ll keep going,” he said. “There are still a lot of unanswered questions.” ■



SUSAN SAUER PHOTO/NETWORK PUBLICATIONS

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