

The BEAR Necessities

Seeing a New Hampshire bruin
is always a thrill.

BY DAVE ANDERSON

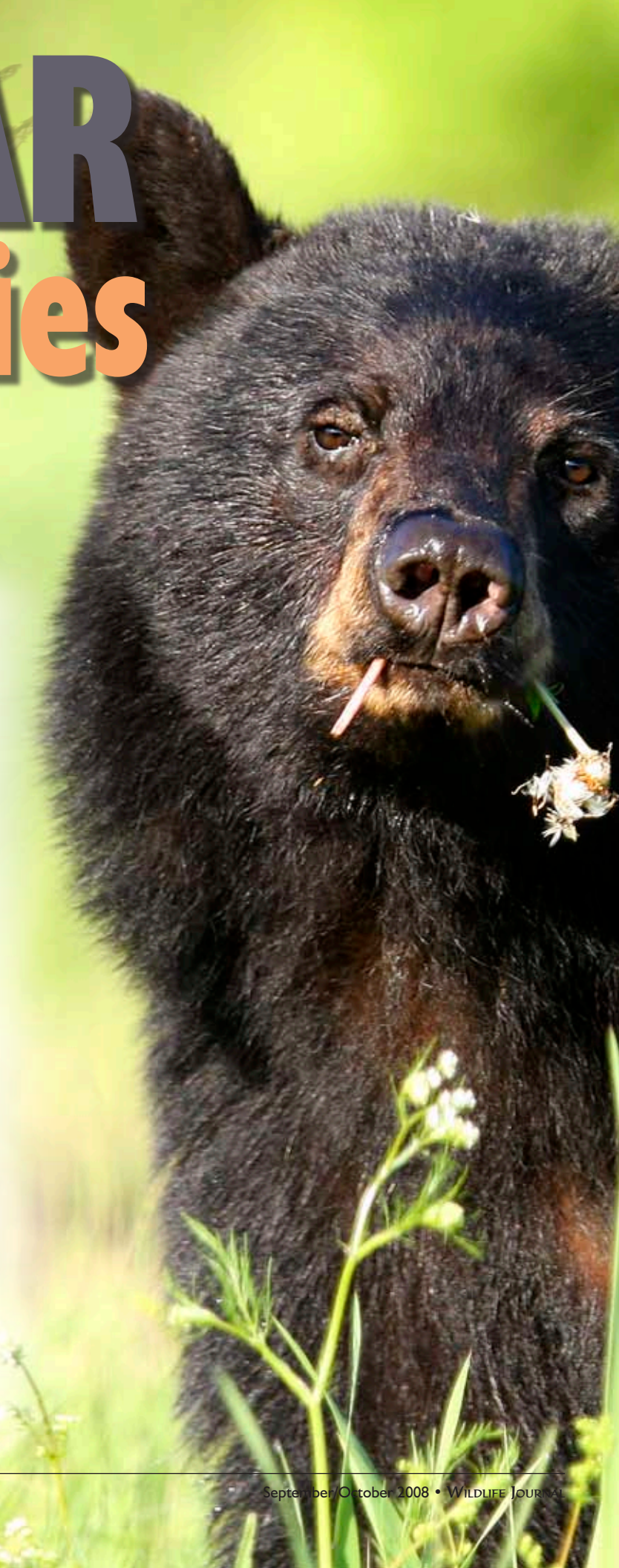
Late September, early morning... “What happened to all the apples?” I had raked and piled bushels of windfalls neatly over the weekend, intending to make cider or sauce. Now they were gone. All six bushels – every last apple gone. Who would steal mealy fallen fruit, soft cavities crawling with sugar-drunk pinstriped hornets?

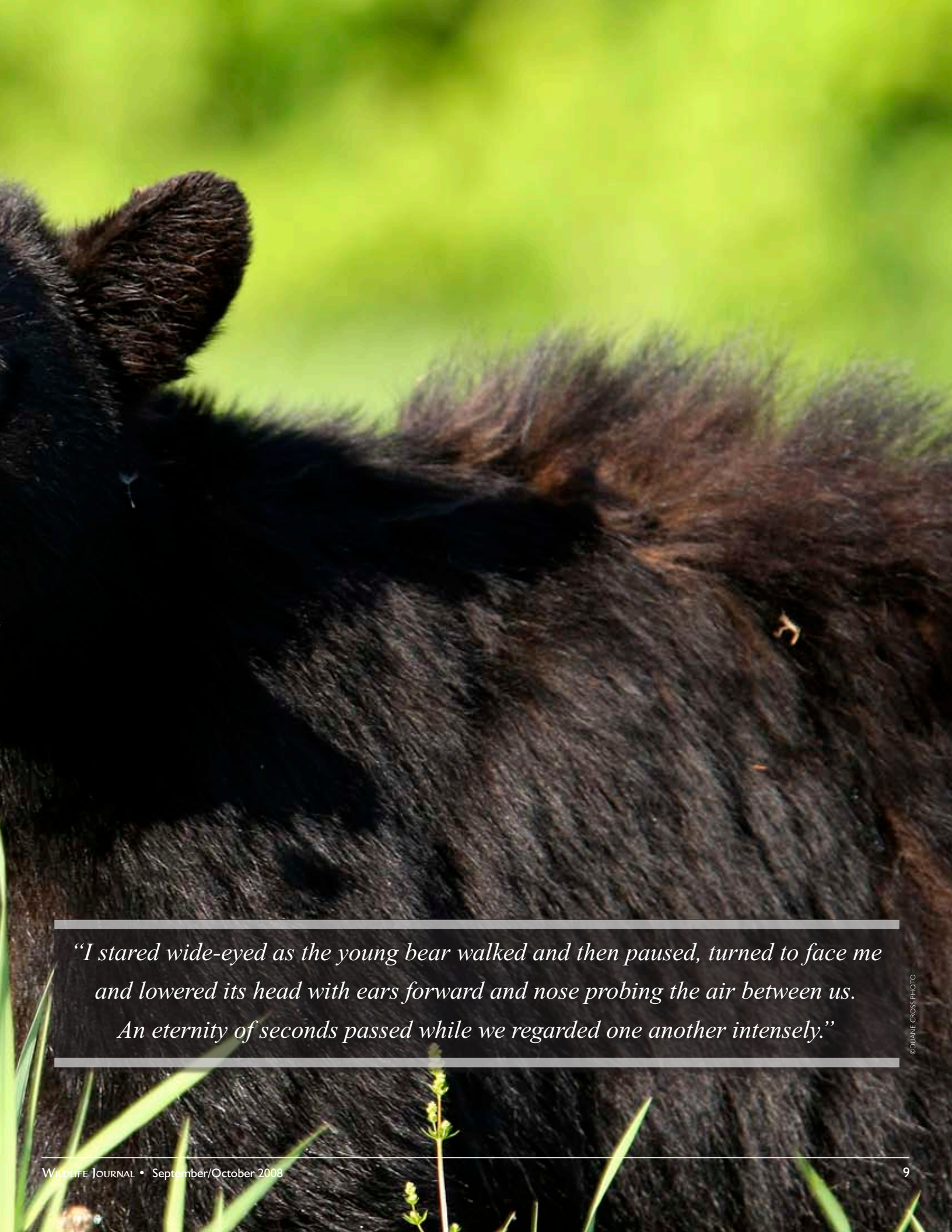
“Maybe the deer finished them?” my wife offered. “No,” I snorted. “Not all of them in only one night!” I went to investigate the orchard, hoping to find some visible track in frosty grass and fallen leaves, or footprints in the mud along the brook.

I counted a dozen piles of fresh dung – huge piles loaded with apple flesh and seeds, and fringed with bits of black hair. Bear scat; a ton of it. Patties ten inches across! I could have nearly filled my wheelbarrow. I’d never seen a bear up close. I imagined a huge hairy beast shoveling apples into its mouth, grunting and drooling cider. The bear loomed suddenly real on our farm and immense in my imagination.

By the time I arrived home from the office that night, it was nearly dark. “C’mon down, bear – it’s feeding time.” I shook down a few more apples and sat listening to the whispering leaves when I heard a more distinct rustling, a “shuffling leaves” sound that drew nearer – a squirrel or a deer? I sat frozen in place, hairs bristling on the back of my neck.

A smallish bear cautiously emerged from the forest gloom and shuffled toward an apple tree fifty yards away. I stared wide-eyed as the young bear walked and then paused, turned to face me and lowered its head with ears forward and nose probing the air between us. An eternity of seconds passed while we regarded one another intensely. Slowly, it turned back toward the stone wall and began a slow retreat. Maple leaves rustled under soft paws as it ambled out of sight. I was suddenly aware of my pulse pounding in my ears. I stood awkwardly and walked, slowly at first and then faster, adrenaline surging, sprinting toward the lights of the house, grinning and yelling, “A bear! – I saw a bear!”





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it's always supper time
for bears.*

FALL FEAST

By October, dusk arrives earlier. The ticking of the black bears' internal clocks drives them to roam in search of food in preparation for winter hibernation. In autumn, it's always supper time for bears.

After feeding on carbohydrate-rich summer fruits – “soft mast” like strawberry, raspberry, blackberry, blueberry, pin cherry, black cherry – bears seek fall fare. In September and October, they feast on fruits of mountain ash, apple and wild grapes, as well as fat and protein-rich nut crops like red and white oak

acorns in southern and central N.H. and beechnuts in the northern forest. This “hard mast” is essential to fattening up for winter.

Bears are opportunistic feeders. If regional hard mast crops are a bust – as they were in much of the state in 2007 – black bears may leave the relative security of deep forests and travel to suburbs seeking birdseed and garbage, or to apple orchards and farms for corn and other crops. Needless to say, bears are more vulnerable to hunters when they're in the middle of a corn field, rather than in a remote forest.

WHERE'S THE BEARS?

At the end of 2007, about 4,800 black bears lived in New Hampshire -- 37% more than the 3,500 bears estimated in 1990. Biologist Andy Timmins says the bear population is stable and sustainable, with hunters killing an average of 500 black bears per year. If the long-term objectives of the state's current Big Game Management Plan are achieved, there will be roughly 5,000 bears in New Hampshire during the next decade.



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N.H. Fish and Game manages bears by adjusting hunting seasons. Hunting gives them the capacity to manage and tweak bear population densities region by region -- maximizing habitat potential and minimizing human/bear conflicts.

In the North Country, the bear population is estimated at one bear for every two square miles or so -- just about right, says Timmins, for the amount of available habitat and the “social carrying capacity.” In the White Mountains, where the bear population is denser, Timmins says the goal is to reduce the number of bears to a more socially acceptable level.

Managers are planning for more bears in the central region; although the number of “nuisance” bears is on the rise here, this region can support a higher density of bears based on available habitat. Ditto for the southwest section of the state, where management objectives are designed to allow for modest growth in the bear population. In the more urban southeast, the management plan calls for a slight increase in bear numbers; even so, this part of New Hampshire will always have the lowest density of bears, to strike a balance between lots of people and marginal bear habitat. (Regional bear objectives were formulated in an extensive public species population planning process. Check out the 2006-2015 Big Game Management Plan at www.WildNH.com.)

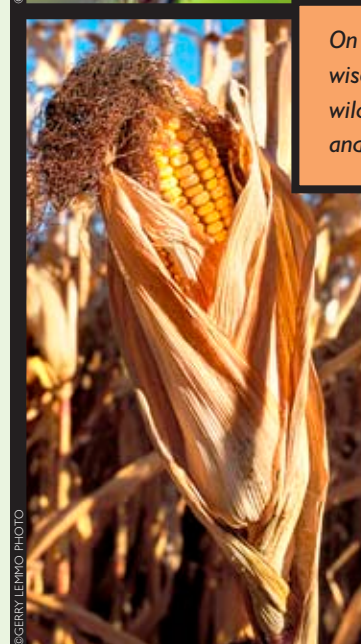
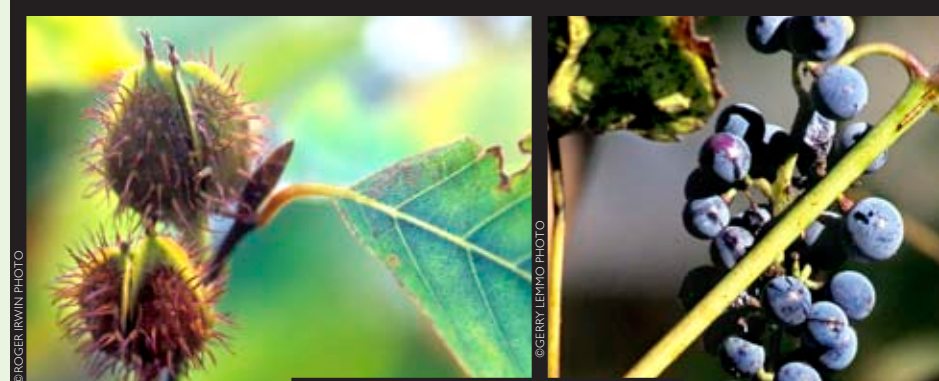
Beech and oak forests are where black bears typically gather to fatten on the cyclical crops of beechnuts and acorns. Scars from bear claws on the beech tree trunks are evidence of repeated use by bears; clusters of five claw scars show where a bear's front paws hugged a tree from the opposite side when climbing. Long vertical slashes indicate where the bear's rear claws gouged the smooth gray bark, braking while sliding back down.

Across New Hampshire's forests, many beech trees are heavily scarred with claw marks, some new and some decades old; interestingly, some beech trees in the same stand have never been climbed. Those with claw-scarred bark are the trees that consistently produce the most viable beechnuts, specifically the nuts that are productive and high in protein and fat. Bears learn to avoid those trees that produce poor-quality nuts. How do black bears on the ground select which trees to climb? Amazingly, using their sense of smell and possibly previous bear scars, bears can assess the viability of nuts in the treetops from ground level without the need to climb the tree and sample nuts. Certainly, they imprint on individual trees and return annually to show cubs their favorite ones.

THE NOSE KNOWS

A decade ago, U.S. Forest Service biologists studying black bear habitat preferences determined that in autumn, bears prefer to feed in beech forests located on more remote hillsides and along ridges. With a highly developed sense of smell and relatively limited eyesight, black bears rely on air currents flowing up forested hillsides and over ridges to provide strategic olfactory "views" of their surroundings. If there's a food source nearby – beechnuts, a corn field, birdfeeders, a barbecue grill or a dumpster – bears smell it. If hunters or hikers with dogs approach a bear feeding area from one side of a ridge, a bear will flee down the opposite side before being seen or heard. Mountainous topography provides a strategic advantage, because bears rely on air currents as their "CNN of the forest," conveying up-to-the-minute news headlines in Smell-O-Vision. The topographic "scent-scape" has a big influence on bear travel corridors and preferred feeding and resting locations.

I recently visited a perfect pocket of winter bear habitat deep within a certain Forest Society-owned reservation. Getting there requires an arduous bush-whack through dense hardwoods with a thick spruce understory. The January '98 ice storm shredded parts of the canopy, leaving stressed, dying trees. Temporary openings created by the ice storm now favor thick regeneration of hobblebush, striped maple



On the bear menu in fall, clockwise from upper left: beechnuts, wild grapes, white oak acorns and corn.



and pin cherry. This forest citadel is not easy to reach or traverse. Judging by ample bear scat, visible trails and well-clawed beech trees, bears know that. It's here where they find ideal structural elements for their dens: large root wads of pine trees that blew down on shallow soil; talus slopes of jumbled granite boulders.

In the past, open dumps were a big temptation for N.H.'s bears. Today, the use of bearproof dumpsters and a growing awareness of bear behavior help keep bears out of trouble.



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Evidence of bear activity: distinctive claw marks on smooth beech bark (above); berry-filled scat (below).



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Travel corridors connecting large, high-quality tracts of bear habitat are important in regions increasingly fragmented by roads and housing developments. A large boar (male bear) may maintain a home range of 50 square miles in good habitat, or up to 100 square miles in poorer quality habitat. Sows (female bears) and female cubs occupy smaller, 5 to 20-square-mile home ranges. A dominant boar's home range may overlap territories occupied by a potential harem of five or many more sows. Interloping young boars travel warily between favored feeding and resting locales.

Another feature of bear country is scent posts – red pines with soft, corky, aromatic bark that bears claw, bite and rub. Bears have even used red pine telephone poles! Bears rub scent glands behind their ears against the sticky pitch and bear hair collects on the tree wounds. Other bears visit, bite, scratch and sniff and rub in an ursine equivalent of an online chat room or MySpace page. The sticky pitch fixes bear scent in its home range and conveys the timing and frequency of bears' recent visits, as well as their physical stature and reproductive status. Sows with female cubs remaining in their natal territories also post repeated visits. Red pine pitch may even confer social status, like bear "cologne" during the summer breeding season.

THE TROUBLE WITH BEARS

Black bears' exquisite sniffers can get them into big trouble when they follow their noses outside their natural habitat. Human/bear conflicts and "nuisance" bear complaints have increased in some suburban areas – typically a result of homeowners inadvertently attracting bears to their property with bird feeders, garbage cans and pet food bowls left outside.

Some say that to do a good job of managing wildlife, you have to manage people. That's especially true in the case of bears, which easily learn un-bear-like behaviors in places where people live. "People are intrigued by bears, but in general, they don't want them nearby," says Fish and Game wildlife biologist Andy Timmins. The same way that bears teach their cubs which trees produce viable nuts, Timmins says,

"they teach them which bird feeders or dumpsters to visit, so the unwanted behavior is passed from generation to generation." He notes that many, if not most, bear/human conflicts could be prevented if people who live in, or visit, bear country did their part to minimize interactions. Fish and Game's familiar "Something's Bruin" campaign reminds people that "A Fed Bear Is A Dead Bear," and binoculars are still the best way to get a good look at a bear.

Around December, when food becomes scarce, bears enter hibernation. The temperature drops, snow starts falling, and it's safe to start feeding the birds again. During hibernation, bear cubs are born and adults lose a quarter of their body weight. Come spring, make sure that your bird feeders are put away for the season; bears and their new cubs emerge in April, alert and ravenous.

I've now seen black bears many times since my first encounter in the orchard. While there's less adrenaline, running and shouting, it's always a thrill. I find myself mentioning a recent bear sighting for a few days afterwards. Some of the very best wildlife stories still begin with "I saw a bear..." **W**

Naturalist Dave Anderson is Director of Education for The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, a private, nonprofit land trust and forestry organization that manages 160 Forest Reservations totaling more than 45,000 acres. Many properties are managed for wildlife habitat through cooperative agreements with N.H. Fish and Game. Visit www.forestsociety.org.



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Bears in Your Backyard?

If you have questions about bear-related problems in your neighborhood, advice is just a phone call away. Fish and Game and U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services toll-free bear hotline: 1-888-749-2327 (1-888-SHY-BEAR).