



**Forget folklore, the Black Bear is really shy and non-aggressive**

## **Brunswick Wildlife The Right to Arm Bears**

Recent arguments before the Supreme Court concerning the Second Amendment resurfaced a long-standing squabble among constitutional scholars who have studied the writings of Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, et al. One splinter group insists that there was a “typo” and the amendment should refer to “the right to bare arms” while the other believes it was meant to guarantee the right to arm bears.

Post-ratification blame was placed on scribe William Lambert who prepared the document. When interviewed by Wolf Blitzer, Lambert lashed out, telling Madison “Go powder your wig!” or something like that.

Please do not be offended, thinking I have disrespected the Bill of Rights or bears. I deeply respect both. If you are offended by the lame attempt at humor, you may want to turn the page now.

Before Europeans arrived black bears lived statewide in North Carolina. Their numbers were greatly reduced through hunting by early settlers, loss of habitat due to development, and indirectly by the blight that killed American Chestnut Trees, a major food source. By the early 1900’s, bears were found only in remote mountain and coastal locations.

Bears have made a dramatic recovery in the past forty years. Today we have stable or increasing populations in most mountain and coastal areas of our state.

Brunswick County’s dense hardwood bottomlands, swamps, and pocosins provide excellent bear habitat. The Town Creek floodplain for example has a healthy bear population.

Black bears are omnivores whose diet includes: acorns, peanuts, and other nuts; berries and other fruits; carrion; corn; fish; frogs and reptiles; small mammals; grubs and insects; and honey. Their lifespan averages four to five years with few living more than ten years. Adult males weigh 200-700 pounds while females weigh 100-300 pounds.

In light of new knowledge of the hibernation process, black bears are now considered excellent hibernators and may sleep for months without eating, drinking, or excreting waste.

In fall, bears gorge on food, adding fat to prepare to den up for winter. They enter their dens in late November to early January and leave by March or early April. Tree cavities, hollow logs, caves, and holes in the ground may provide a den, its bed to be lined by sticks, leaves, and grasses.

The depth and duration of their hibernation is based on genetics and programmed to match the availability food in their regional habitat. In the South where food is available all year some bears do not hibernate and those that do, like pregnant females, may be easily awakened.

Our folklore traditionally portrayed bears as bad guys; however, humans are now becoming more tolerant of them because we have more knowledge and bear myths have been debunked. Instead of fearing and having them killed, many folks are enjoying observing bears that live nearby.

Of the myths, the greatest is that black bears are likely to attack humans in defense of cubs. This is very unlikely. Defense of cubs is a grizzly bear trait. According to The North American Bear Center, black bear mothers are not known to have killed a human in defense of cubs.

Bears really do not worry me. I follow the experts' advice. Black bears are really shy and non-aggressive, avoiding humans when possible unless they have become habituated to people feeding them. The basics of bear safety are: make noise so you do not surprise them, do not feed them, and do not approach them.

Also, do not run. Bears have good close vision but do not see well at a distance. If they charge to get a better look at you, stand still and make noise. They are likely to stop and move on. If not, some experts still recommend playing dead if a bear attacks. Play dead? I will not have to play.

While their vision may be suspect, bears' hearing exceeds our frequency range and is much more sensitive. Black bears have an exceptional sense of smell. They are one of the more intelligent mammals and have an excellent long-term memory.

Of my bear stories, my favorite occurred as I returned home from a Carolina Bird Club meeting in Augusta. I left very early before daybreak because Hurricane Jeanne was approaching.

On US 74 near Lake Waccamaw, in the early morning light, I passed an adult bear sitting on its haunches on the far side of the highway, waiting to cross. I slowed and we looked each other in the face....cool!

As I started to turn around at the next crossover to go back for a photo, I looked in my rearview mirror and realized the bear had slowed its crossing and was in the median. I

decided to drive on and sped up to ensure that the bear did not get hit by another vehicle because of me. Seconds later I looked back to see it lope across the road.

I had planned to get my camera out of the back of my SUV from the outside, forgetting the aroma of sausage biscuit wafting from my hands and mustache. Could it be that the bear was trying to lure me back by stopping in the median?

For more bear facts, visit the North American Bear Center website I used to research this article at: <http://www.bear.org/website/>.

It's time to fess up. As far as I know, no bears have been armed and I was kidding earlier about Wolf Blitzer. Everyone knows he did not start reporting from the front until the Spanish-American War.

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