



Whitetail Predation

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Won't You Be My Neighbor

I HAVE LIVED in six different states up and down the east coast and even ventured across the mighty Mississippi but Pennsylvania is the only state in which I have shared a range with the black bear. The possibility of a new neighbor weighing 200-500 pounds, having 1- 1.5-inch claws, running up to 35 mph, and scaling trees and fences with ease was something entirely new and somewhat foreign to me. I never really gave it much thought until my acorn-shaped birdfeeder disappeared, unceremoniously ripped from the branch of the large rhododendron five feet from my back door. Hello, neighbor.

Historically, black bears were found across all forested portions of North America from Alaska to Mexico. But as civilization tamed the wilds of this continent, the once ample supply of black bear habitat became increasingly scarce. Today, the Appalachian Mountains are the spine propping up black bears populations in the eastern U.S. Pennsylvania is in the heart of the eastern black bear range and sightings are possible in all 67 counties. However, their habitat preference is relatively inaccessible terrain with thick understory and good supplies of mast. Not known for their social graces, bears, which can live well into their teens and beyond, are solitary animals with the exception of females with cubs.

Nearsighted, they can't see clearly beyond their nose so to speak. But that wonderful long, broad nose "sees" what the eyes can't and their ears can hear a pin drop.

When it comes to the bear menu, they could dine at the same establishment as a coyote. Bears are known as opportunistic omnivores. Seventy-five percent of their diet is typically vegetation, which includes tree buds, fruits, berries, acorns, skunk cabbage and the occasional spoils of a birdfeeder. The other 25 percent of the menu is comprised of mice, squirrels, groundhogs, colonial insects, with a fawn or two thrown in for good measure.

Wait a minute, did you say fawn? Yes, I did. The lumbering and loveable lug won't turn his nose up when whitetail is served. In the Pennsylvania Game Commission fawn survival study, which was the largest conducted in North America, bears took as many fawns as coyotes. Fawns are abundant and available to bears in June and July. After that, our lumbering lug moves back to things that don't run away, including roadkilled deer. Really, who wants to chase dinner when you can just plunk your fanny in a berry patch or visit the neighbor's birdfeeder?