

Waltzing with Bears

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I went upstairs in the middle of the night.

I tiptoed in, and I turned on the light.

But to my surprise there was no one in sight.

My Uncle Walter goes dancing at night.¹

Julie saw the first bear on the portage between Russell Lake and Chatterton Lake. That was in nineteen ninety-four. No one could remember the last time we had seen a bear; in fact, it was something of a wonder anybody could even recognize one. A long time ago Frank saw a bear at the three-story campsite on Kahshahpiwi Lake, but that was back in the nineteen sixties. We had finished breaking camp and Frank had gone to close the latrine. As he was engaged in this chore a bear wandered toward the campsite, presumably to see if we had left any bacon behind. Frank finished his job, got in the last canoe, and we watched the bear investigate the campsite from the security of the lake.

Bears can swim – more on that later – but it's unlikely they can swim faster than a canoe filled with accomplished paddlers, leading to our feeling of relative safety. I assume the bear also felt safe, since it was on shore and we were on the water. Bears can outrun most campers, so we were no more a threat to the bear than it was to us: a mutually satisfactory arrangement. And, equally satisfactorily, a few minutes later canoers and bear went their separate ways.

A few years later we saw two bear cubs in a tree in Fort Francis, Ontario, but that doesn't really count because it was in town and we were in a car. But it was very

¹ Attributed to Theodore Geisel. There is significant debate about the provenance of this song. It has been attributed to Geisel (Dr. Seuss) because of its appearance in *The Cat in the Hat Songbook* (Random House Children's Books, 1967), but the lyrics in *My Uncle Terwilliger Dances with Bears* bear only a passing resemblance to these, from Gordon Bok, Anne Mayo Muir, and Ed Trickett's *Waltzing with Bears* on their recording, *Minneapolis Concert* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1987.)

exciting, and the assembled crowd kept speculating that if Mama Bear turned up there would be hell to pay. Of course, by then Mama Bear had seen the crowd and was probably applying for asylum in International Falls at that very moment. In fact, according to Lynn Rogers, a PhD black bear researcher with the Wildlife Research Institute, "... black bear mothers are [reluctant] to defend their cubs against people, even when the family is cornered in a den and I'm trying to stick the mother with a needle to tranquilize her."² Still, if it's all the same to you, I'll stay as far from any bear as possible; I'd hate to be the one to find a bear who wasn't familiar with Rogers's research.

I should note that the topic of discussion here is the North American black bear, *Ursus americanus*. Grizzly or brown bears – *Ursus arctos horribilis* – never had a permanent population east or south of the Dakotas, although there have been itinerant brown bears in Nebraska and even Kansas. But in historic times black bears have been both ubiquitous and abundant across North America, and even in the Twenty-first Century itinerant black bears, mostly yearling males, have appeared in Iowa and Illinois with some regularity despite having been extirpated from both states by the end of the Nineteenth Century.

In the Minnesota Arrowhead and Northwest Ontario canoe outfitters love to tell bear stories, especially to neophyte canoers. I think it lets them feel a smug superiority over the gullible tourist. There was, for example, an outfitter in Atikokan who told a party I was leading about the bear that destroyed his cabin, while he was in it. Davy Crockett, who "kil't him a b'ar when he was only three,"³ had nothing on this guy. To hear the

² Rogers, L. bear.org/how-dangerous-are-black-bears/, accessed Sep. 9, 2021

³ Bruns, G. and T.W. Blackburn. "The Ballad of Davy Crockett." Walt Disney Productions: 1954.

outfitter tell it, every campsite has at least four resident bears, and you'll be lucky to escape with only a mangled tent.

Jon Waters, a good Wilmette boy who by the time I met him had a canoe outfitting business in Ely, Minnesota, loved to talk about the bears that would come to raid his garbage cans, and how his dogs would bark furiously but the bears paid no attention. Outfitter tales, however, are a lot like fish stories: they grow in the telling, and they usually start with minnows. So they don't really count, either.

A really long time ago, when my family and several others would spend part of the summer at Camp O-Tahn-Agon near Three Lakes in northern Wisconsin, we would go "bear hunting" at night. This involved packing as many children as possible into one or more of the ubiquitous station wagons every family drove in those days and driving to the Rhinelander dump. Bears love dumps – they're the ursid equivalent of Dairy Queen – and at night bruins from all over the North Woods would flock to feast on the scraps. The tourists would drive through, windows down to enjoy the rich aroma of smoldering garbage in that pre-air conditioning age, and look for bears caught in the headlights. The bears seldom failed to oblige, and often several families (bear, not human) would be sampling the provender simultaneously, some in the fish gut room, others picking over the restaurant table scraps, still others perusing the domestic residue. This, of course, was in the days before the Environmental Protection Agency insisted that dumps, which have since been verbally sanitized into "landfills," be covered every day before the dump closed. I have no idea what North Woods tourist families do for fun in the evening now; probably play video games.

(A parenthetical note: hunting outfitters in Northern Ontario spend the summer putting human food in locations known to be frequented by bears. Come the autumn they will rent cabins to bear “hunters,” take them to tree stands set up at the bait locations, and let these brave outdoorsmen shoot their bear from the safety of a concealed, elevated blind. “Hunting, indeed,” he snorted.)

But by nineteen ninety-four it had been a long time since any of us had actually seen a bear anywhere other than in a zoo or a picture. At least, since any of us had seen a black bear. In nineteen eighty-five I was hiking alone in Glacier National Park. The park service employees always tell you not to hike alone in bear country, because there is a much greater likelihood of coming across a bear without giving him adequate warning. Hikers in groups, by their nature, make a lot of noise but solo hikers are usually more quiet.

Why should it always be the hiker who has to give the bear a warning? Do the bear rangers ever tell the bears to make lots of noise so they won’t startle the hikers? Almost certainly not; bears, being bears, don’t care very much about who they scare. At any rate, I walked around a blind curve on the trail and there, perhaps ten feet ahead, was a herd of the largest grizzly bears anyone had seen since Kit Carson wore short pants. At least, that’s how it seemed to me at the time. In reality, it was two bears, probably of medium size, and probably seventy yards up the trail. But it’s my story, and I get to tell it my way.

I backed up slowly while the bears watched me, and I could hear them quite clearly discussing the relative merits of hiker roasted or as sushi with beargrass lily on the side. After backing around the same corner and hopefully out of sight of the bears I

turned around and walked as quickly as possible back down the trail. These must have been vegetarian bears, because I'm here to relate the story today. Either that, or my lack of recent encounters with soap was enough to offend even the denizens of the dump.

But this was a black bear Julie saw nine years later, on the portage between Russell and Chatterton Lakes. Black bears are, we have been led to believe, less aggressive than brown bears and polar bears, but we had no particular desire to put this hypothesis to the test. There have been some documented instances of black bears attacking hikers and campers in northern Ontario. According to one source there have been seventy-six fatal black bear attacks in North America since nineteen hundred.⁴ In nineteen sixty-eight a young man was killed by a black bear near Atikokan, Ontario. These fatalities also include an alleged fatal encounter later rumored to be murder. In that case Darcy Staver of Glenallen, Alaska, was supposedly shot by her husband and left to be eaten by a bear whom the husband accused of killing his wife in the process of raiding their cabin. In actuality, though, it appears she was seeking refuge from the bear on her cabin roof, fell, and was then mauled by the bear.⁵ But I still wonder if anyone has recently seen the wife of the Atikokan outfitter who claims a black bear ransacked his cabin.

After Julie's excited report of the bear we hurried along, spending no more time on that portage than absolutely necessary. We didn't even paddle around the corner to look at the top of Chatterton Falls, something we usually do when we go that way. We

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fatal_bear_attacks_in_North_America, accessed Mar. 27, 2021.

⁵ Medred, C. 2016. <https://www.adn.com/uncategorized/article/explaining-bear-attack-never-easy/2010/08/18/>, accessed Sep. 9, 2021.

went on to McDougall Lake instead, and found a pleasant campsite far enough from the bear that we could invoke his name without, we hoped, also inviting a visit.

Julie saw the second bear the next day, on the portage from McDougall Lake to Keats Lake. That portage starts with a jagged, boulder-filled landing and proceeds steeply up a muddy slope. At the top the portage levels off for a quarter mile or so through a pleasant open forest before descending steeply downhill to a rather poor canoe landing which can accommodate only a single canoe at a time. The presence of bears simply adds another aspect of unpleasantness to the portage.

By now it was clear that Julie was a bear magnet. They found us even though we were only taking a short day trip, leaving our camp set up and even leaving one member of the party, Julie's sister, as a guard to protect our camp from the ursine marauders we now knew to infest all parts of northern Ontario, lurking behind every white pine and erupting through every crack in the granite. Clearly, it was only going to be a matter of time before we fell victim to Yogi and BooBoo's conspecifics.

Of course, we had no way of actually verifying Julie's bear stories. No one else had seen the bears. No one else had even smelled the bears. Speaking of things that have only a nodding acquaintance with soap, bears smell about as bad as animals can smell. If you have a dog, you know that dogs can roll in some pretty foul-smelling things. Compared to bears, dogs are only foot-washing Baptists; bears go for the total immersion effect. So you might think that some of us would smell the bears which were apparently lined up three-deep along both sides of the portage, but that didn't seem to be the case. Still, we were prepared to believe Julie. After all, her mother was along, and you can't make up stories in the presence of your mother.

But how can you miss something as large as a bear? According to the University of Minnesota-Duluth an adult Minnesota black bear stands three feet or more tall at the shoulder and weighs between two hundred and fifty and three hundred pounds.⁶ We aren't talking about small game here, and walking past something the size of a Chicago Bear and smelling like a ready-for-pumpout septic tank without seeing it seems highly improbable.

By the time we heard Julie's story we had already decided we weren't going back to camp that way. That portage is, not to put too fine a point on it, a bear. So, like the three wise men, we went home by a different route; one far less exciting, but also flatter and less apt to produce undesirable wildlife sightings.

I may have left the impression that we are opposed on principle to observing the tooth-and-claw part of nature, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, we will happily watch moose munching water lily roots, beavers industriously repairing the dam we have just dragged a canoe over, or eagles and ospreys soaring overhead as we paddle. We would even happily watch a bear, as long as it was on shore and we were on the water headed far away from it.

Bears and campers don't play well together. For one thing, bears are always hungry: there is no such thing as a bear on a diet, behavior you might expect from an animal that may go without food for seven months of the year.⁷ Yogi raiding a pic-a-nic basket has nothing on an actual North Woods bruin going after a food pack. The general perception is that a bear denied what he perceives to be his, not your, dinner can be astonishingly grumpy, and is apt to walk over, not around, you on his way to dinner. A

⁶ <https://mn mammals.d.umn.edu/bear>, accessed Sep.9, 2021.

⁷ https://bearstudy.org/website/images/stories/Publications/A_Bear_in_its_Lair.pdf, accessed Apr. 30, 2021

bear isn't obsessively careful about how he opens the food pack either, shredding being the favored method of entry. Once in a food pack, bears aren't especially fastidious. The consensus among canoers is that there are no bearproof packs, only packs a bear hasn't gotten into yet. All in all, having bears anywhere near your campsite is not a particularly good idea.

We were camped once on Ted Lake, on a cold, wet evening in the middle of a cold, wet trip. We had finished dinner and were sitting on a rock by the lakeshore, the drizzle having temporarily stopped, when a lone paddler approached. A cousin, Julie's mother, told the paddler that he was welcome to rest on our rock if he so chose. The middle-aged man interpreted this to mean that he should spend the night with us, along with his dog and several fish that appeared to have been out of the water most of the day.

He proceeded to fry these fish in gallons of oil, after spreading several pounds of breading more on the ground than on the fish. After this sumptuous repast he cleaned his pan by pouring the oil on the ground, wiping the pan with paper towels, then leaving the towels on the ground. Following this distinctly unappealing meal he told us that he always seemed to have trouble with bears in his camp.

It's a wonder that this candidate for a Darwin Award can manage to cross a street, let alone survive in the wilderness. He does everything but hand out engraved invitations to dinner, then expresses astonishment that the bears always seem to find his camp. I'm not a genius, but even I can work out how the bears find him; what I can't work out is why he wasn't victim number seventy-seven a long time ago.

The Family Ursidae, classed as members of the Order Carnivora although black bears at least are true omnivores, has several members: Nearctic (that is, North

American) black bears, Holarctic (that is, occurring around the world) brown and polar bears, spectacled bears in the Andes, Asiatic black bears, sloth bears in the Subcontinent, and sun bears in Southeast Asia. According to Kumar *et al.*, although the fossil record indicates a close relationship between the two black bear species, genetic evidence shows that the North American black bear is in fact a sister group to the brown and polar bears, not the Asiatic black bear, and the North American black bear is found only in the New World while the Asiatic black bear is, as the name implies, endemic to the eastern part of the Old World.⁸

The Ursidae are believed by some to be descended from dogs, but this seems improbable. As carnivores they share a distant common ancestor, but the relationship is tenuous. Bear dentition alone gives them away: bears lack carnassial teeth, those scissor-like premolars found in cats and dogs that shear food rather than masticating it.⁹ The inability to chew and grind food condemns these animals to a life of dining on the equivalent of steak tartare.

Black bears, on the other hand, are only facultative carnivores. They may eat meat, if it's available, but according to Evelyn Bull and her colleagues, black bears are far more likely to dine at the salad bar or the ant farm than at the nearest McDonald's.¹⁰ Bull did find that black bears will consume deer and moose fawns during the fawning season, but as a percentage of overall annual diet meat plays a relatively small role.

⁸ Kumar, V., *et al.*. 2017. The evolutionary history of bears is characterized by gene flow across species. *Nature Scientific Reports* 7: 464-487.

⁹ <https://medium.com/usfws/drilling-down-into-bear-dentition-a29ab707a9df#:~:text=%20Drilling%20Down%20into%20Bear%20Dentition%20%201,fool%20you%E2%80%8A%E2%80%8Ablack%20bears%20are%20not%20always...%20More%20>. Accessed Sep. 9, 2021

¹⁰ Bull, E.L. *et al.*. 2001. The importance of vegetation, insects, and neonate ungulates in black bear diet in northeastern Oregon. *Northwest Science* 75 (3): 244-253.

Black bears are voracious seasonal feeders, although their anatomy imposes some limitations. They will eat whatever is most plentiful at that season. Lynn Rogers notes that while black bears are extremely fond of ants, their claws, so useful for climbing trees, make them inefficient diggers.¹¹ While their grizzly cousins may be able to unearth anthills and shred logs in search of an ant feast, black bears are largely limited to what their tongues can reach. But the ability to lie flat on the ground with legs outstretched and mouth agape while swimming through a patch of ripe blueberries in July more than makes up for the lack of Formicidae in the diet. In a good season, in a good blueberry patch, bears consume so many blueberries that bear scat often appears blue and contains whole blueberries that pass through the digestive tract unscathed. In fact, Bob Black, a wildlife biologist friend of mine, referred to summer in the North Woods as “blueberry blowout season.”

Which brings up the next logical question: how do we know about black, or any other, bear diets? It’s not like we can ask them to keep a diary and record how much of each item they eat during a day, a week, or a month. The answer is, in a single word, “poop.” The advent of radiotelemetry made it easy to follow bears and look at what comes out of an actively feeding ursine in an effort to determine what went in. Many a wildlife biology graduate student has spent hours peering through a dissecting microscope, picking apart dried scat in an effort to determine what the bear ate in the past

¹¹ Rogers, L. L. 1976. Effects of mast and berry crop failures on survival, growth, and reproductive success of black bears in northeastern Minnesota. *Trans. North Amer. Wildl. and Natural Resour. Conf.* 41:431-438.

hours or days. Although bear biology draws a lot more attention, I am truly glad that I was drawn to plants and their interactions with insects.

But how, if meat forms only a relatively minor part of a bear's diet, do we wind up putting them in the same order as lions and tigers – those same lions and tigers from which they diverged tens of millions of years ago? The Order Carnivora appears in the fossil record some eighty-nine million years ago, and the bear line diverges about forty-eight million years ago.¹² Apart from the polar bears, most of the extant bears, including black and grizzly bears, are only facultative carnivores. So why don't they share the same pseudoorder as *H. sapiens*, the Omnivora?

Without turning this otherwise scintillating evening into a boring lecture on taxonomy, the answer is really quite simple: look at the teeth. Carnivores share a trait that belies their evolutionary ancestry, that of prominent canine teeth. While not as prominent as a saber toothed tiger's or walrus's, a black bear's killing teeth are both fearsome and effective enough to lump it with other carnivores.

As long as we are discussing taxonomy I will digress a little further. Pandas are not at all closely related to North American bears; in fact their shared evolutionary lineage diverged about twenty-four million years ago. The taxonomy goes back and forth: are they members of the Ursidae and more closely related to modern bears, or are they members of the Procyonidae and more closely related to raccoons? At the moment

¹² Nyakatura, K., Bininda-Emonds, O.R. Updating the evolutionary history of Carnivora (Mammalia): a new species-level supertree complete with divergence time estimates. *BMC Biol* **10**, 12 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1741-7007-10-12> Accessed Sep. 9, 2021.

the science seems to favor a closer relationship with the Ursidae, but there's still plenty of time and genetic study left for that to change again.¹³

Which brings up the matter of koalas. If you want to see an Australian cringe, talk about koala "bears." Koalas are marsupials, and there any resemblance to a true bear, or even a panda, ends, along with any further reference to either pandas or koalas this evening.

When last we saw Julie we were on the McDougall-Keats portage. We decided that traversing that portage again would be to invite further bear encounters, and so instead of heading east from our McDougall campsite we went west. This brought its own challenges, not least being the portage from McDougall to Eag Lake, an unpleasant one that begins in muskeg and then deteriorates. Taken all in all, perhaps the hundreds of bears now known to infest the Keats portage would have been better.

It has long been the duty of the leader of our family trips to inquire of the rangers at the park entrance if "there are any bears we should know about." The usual response is, "No, but if you have any bear trouble please let us know when you return." Once in a while a ranger will tell us about a particular portage or campsite that campers have reported as having a troublesome bear. And then there's Walter Lake.

This trip with my cousin Julie, assorted other cousins, and one or two hangers-on, was in the summer of 1994. For at least ten years before that my family had been travelling through Walter Lake, between Sturgeon and Nym Lakes. And every time we said we would be going through Walter, the park ranger would remark on The Walter Lake Bear.

¹³ science.jrank.org/pages/5005/Pandas-Evolution-classification.html accessed Sep. 9, 2021.

The Walter Bear had, in fact, reached almost mythic proportion. No one, it seemed, could paddle through Walter Lake without encountering this ursine legend. No one had ever been injured, but the number of food packs rent asunder or dragged off into the primeval forest was uncountable – at least, according to the legend. The bear, a female, often travelled in the company of offspring, doubtless to teach them the skills required to obtain a free meal with minimal effort. “Don’t leave your food packs unattended on the Elizabeth Lake portage, and be sure you hang them at night if you camp on Walter,” was always the parting advice from the ranger.

Since we first started canoeing in northern Ontario we have never (well, hardly ever) left food packs unattended on any portage. It was standard advice from every canoe outfitter in Ely and Atikokan. In fact, to hear them tell the story, the bears line up on shore and draw straws to see which gets the next party’s food packs. The food packs always go over the portage first, and at the far end someone has to stay with the packs to ward off the bears while others go back for a second load. It is, in fact, a real-life version of the old missionaries-and-cannibals conundrum.

Not that we ever had any trouble. In the deepest recesses of my memory there is a family story that on a very early trip, perhaps our first, my Aunt Judy, Julie’s grandmother, was standing watch against the anticipated marauding hordes of *Ursi americani* on Horse Portage and had actually scared off a bear. But I’m not sure, and that is the only time I can even pretend to recall that we had encountered a bear on a portage. Until, of course, we brought the bear magnet on the trip that forms the backdrop for this paper.

The large portage packs in our earliest days were manufactured from heavy, olive-drab canvas with broad leather straps by the Duluth Tent and Awning Company. While ideally shaped for loading in a canoe, and capable of carrying large volumes, Duluth packs present little challenge to a hungry bear. To up the ante, outfitters and rangers alike recommend hoisting your food packs as far out on the branch of a tree as possible, at least eight feet of the ground and preferably over the lake, a feat requiring estimable strength and dexterity.

First, getting the rope over a branch at least ten or more feet up in the air and six feet from the trunk of tree is a skill not easily acquired. Add to that the fact that food packs are heavy and that hoisting one up and over a branch without a pulley is difficult. Outfitters used to sell elaborate kits with pulleys, messenger lines, ropes, and instructions to assist you in foiling ravenous bears, but still the basic problem remains: getting that first rope or messenger line over a branch at least fifteen feet in the air. I never saw or knew of anyone who applied this simple machine, most people preferring to rely on luck and brute force. First, you make several attempts to get the end of the rope over the branch and back down to the ground. Then, you enlist half your party to lift while the other half pulls. But Duluth packs, ideal for loading in canoes, are awkward in the air, and your lifting crew is trying to do this on uneven ground at arms' length. Then the branch you selected turns out to be too weak to support the weight of the food pack, and the entire scheme comes crashing down, knocking the lifters down while the pullers, now hauling on a rope with no resistance, land in a heap. Meanwhile the bears, the thwarting of whom is the purpose of this exercise in futility, have been watching this Three Stooges comedy and collapsed in uncontrollable laughter. And then you start all over.

Or you do as we did. You recognize that this is in fact a fool's errand, and you apply a degree of logic. You have canoes that you have hauled up on shore and turned over for the night. Why not put the food packs under the canoes? This is in fact what we did on that first trip over five decades ago and what we have done ever since without incident. But in reality, it probably isn't our ingenuity that keeps our food packs safe from bears. I have already remarked on what is likely to happen to fishermen, or anyone else, who leave items of comestible interest out overnight. In our groups we have taken fastidiousness almost to the point of mania. All food is put away before retiring for the evening, and all dishes washed. Food packs are secured under the canoes. We have even, if bear invasion seems imminent, arranged pots and pans on top of the canoes, hoping the noise will scare away any inquisitive bruins. The result has been an unbroken sequence of bear-free canoe trips.

There are far more dangerous animals in the North Woods, at least if you are measuring on a raided-food-pack scale. I have lost track of the number of times the morning has brought signs not of bears but of mice, squirrels, and chipmunks, signs in the form of the powdery residue of pancake mix spread liberally through the breakfast pack, brown sugar everywhere, holes gnawed in the oatmeal bag, and every loaf of bread sampled. You clean up that mess knowing that the next morning may bring the same.

We eventually came on a different kind of pack. Whitewater paddlers and rafters have known for years about waterproof SealLine packs, made of rubberized material which rolls over on itself, forming a water- and mostly airtight seal. That same design also turns out to keep the marauding rodents at bay, and you can't ask for more than that. Well, you could ask for something that portages comfortably, because the straps are

narrow and bite into your shoulders when portaging and the packs themselves are almost cylindrical, not a shape that conforms well to the human back. But a rodent-repellent food pack is still a great find. And, coincidentally, more bear repellent than the old Duluth pack.

Actual bear repellent, something analogous to insect repellent, apparently doesn't exist; the experts at the National Park Service maintain that there is no bear deterrent you can spray on yourself or your pack to repel a bear in advance.¹⁴ Bear spray, on the other hand, is essentially a more expensive form of pepper spray, in a can with a larger volume and higher air pressure. Sprayed in a cloud through which a bear has to charge, the bear may actually change course and leave the vicinity.

Unfortunately, importing bear spray into Canada, or the possession of pepper spray, is illegal. Anyone who has ever driven into Canada and announced their intention to camp will attest that the Canada Border Services Agency will ask you if you have any bear spray, and confiscate any you admit to possessing. They will also ask you if you have any potatoes; we have not yet ascertained if it is also illegal to throw potatoes at bears, or if the potato proscription applies only to russets or Yukon golds or if it applies to potatoes generally.

None of this really matters, since until we brought Julie we had, as noted, never been bothered by bears. But now we were heading into the domain of The Walter Bear. Walter Lake has, to the best of my knowledge, four campsites: a small one near the Lonely Lake portage; a quite nice one on the island in the middle of the lake with an excellent canoe landing rock; another small one on the same island, close enough to the aforementioned site that it might logically be construed to be an annex of the larger; and a

¹⁴ www.nps.gov/yell/learn/nature/bearspray.htm accessed Apr. 12, 2021

large but sloping one near the Elizabeth Lake portage. Since Walter isn't usually crowded we planned to camp on the island. We had convinced ourselves years before that island campsites are safe from ursine depredation. The fact that at least some of us have seen bears swimming has done nothing to dispel our faith in the safety of island campsites, but nonetheless we take all our usual bear precautions regardless of the insularity of the campsite.

“Well, darn!” As we approached the island we could see obvious signs of human occupation, and eventually the occupants themselves. We gave our fellow paddlers a friendly wave – we were too far away for them to see the disappointment on our faces – and carried on to the Elizabeth portage campsite, our group being too large to use the site near the Lonely portage and not wanting to disturb the occupants of the large island campsite.

We reached the campsite, set up tents and other camping paraphernalia, swam, and then began the process of making dinner. I have forgotten who first saw the bear approaching, but it doesn't really matter. It was time to apply the advice we had seen and heard so often.

The approved method for dealing with black bears is to walk towards them, making as much noise as possible and trying to make yourself look large and intimidating. When approached in this manner, black bears are generally reported to decamp.

Using this guidance, we armed ourselves with plates, pots, pans, and paddles and walked toward the invader, banging the aforementioned and shouting “Shoo, bear!” and other useful phrases, assuming that being in Northern Ontario the bear spoke English.

And sure enough, the bear ambled off. We went back to cooking dinner, confident of our ability to deal with the local ruffians.

But this isn't just any old *Ursus americanus*; this is The Walter Bear, well used to canoers and their habits, and so a few minutes later the bear reappeared. Out came the bearaphernalia, more waving and shouting ensued, and again the bear wandered off. When this whole sequence occurred a third time it became clear that we would either have to move or mount guard on our food overnight. After eating rather more quickly than usual, we struck camp, loaded the canoes, and left the campsite.

But where to go? The bear was clearly patrolling the portage to Elizabeth Lake. In addition, I had explored Elizabeth on other trips and knew that there is only one very small campsite on that long, narrow lake, and the portage from Elizabeth to Jesse, the next lake, is not one you would willingly undertake in the dark. Going back to Lonely Lake seemed similarly ill-advised. Lonely has some nice campsites but once again taking a rough, rocky portage in the dark wasn't too appealing.

We knew from previous usage that the campsite near the Lonely portage was too small for our group; it was really more a lunch stop than a campsite. That left only one option: act like refugees and beg to use the smaller campsite on the island.

Campsites are considered, by both custom and regulation, the exclusive property of the party occupying them, regardless of the size or circumstance of either party. Fortunately for us the people on the island were sympathetic to our plight and were willing to share it with us, and it was unlikely any park rangers would happen along. We put up our tents as quietly as we could, watched the remains of the day slip below the horizon, and went to bed hopeful that The Walter Bear never learned to swim.

Packed up the next morning, we paddled back across Walter Lake to the Elizabeth Lake portage and were over the portage so fast our feet scarcely touched the ground. That poor bear never had a chance of getting to our food packs, not in camp and certainly not on the Elizabeth portage. That night we camped two-and-a-half lakes away.

I would like to continue the tale of this memorable trip with more bear-human interactions, but for the rest of the trip we had no more sightings. However, The Walter Bear and the two portage bears were more than enough and, my bear ecologist friends notwithstanding, it's enough for me to know that there are bears in the wilderness; I don't need to experience them to prove it.

Near the beginning of this tale I inquired of the park staff about any problem bears, and they asked me to report any interactions like the one we had on Walter Lake. When we returned to civilization I did indeed tell the ranger on duty at French Lake about our experience with The Walter Bear. "What did you do?" was the natural inquiry. "Well, discretion is the better part of valor, so we packed up and moved to another site," was all I said. After all, discretion applies when dealing with the park staff, too, and I didn't need a lecture about sharing campsites. As on Walter, I quietly folded my tent and stole away.

He goes wa-wa-wa-wa, wa-waltzing with bears.

Raggy bears, shaggy bears, baggy bears, too.

There's nothing on earth Uncle Walter won't do,

So he can go waltzing, wa-wa-wa waltzing,

So he can waltzing, waltzing with bears.¹⁵

¹⁵ Geisel, *op. cit.*

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