

LAKE OF BAYS

Wildlife



by Jane Coutts

After I met the bears on the path in the dark, indeed, after they came back the next day and totalled the compost, my sister told me how I should have reacted. Apparently, following them down the path with a flashlight to see what the noise was, screaming, turning and running to the cottage was incorrect. "Hold your arms over your head, yell a lot, and walk backwards," she, safely back in the city, read to me from the website of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

OK, is anybody's first instinct going to be to walk backwards, with your arms over your head, uphill, in the woods, in the dark, shouting, while trying to get away? Just a little counter-intuitive, is what I'm

saying. I rushed to the phone to tell my husband to stay where he was in the second cabin, and not to come see why I had screamed. He calmly answered "It never occurred to me." He comes late to cottaging. Maybe he thinks screaming at night in the woods is normal for Lake of Bays?

The reality is, we'd all better learn some bear-lore: sightings, once rare at Lake of Bays, are becoming more frequent. That doesn't mean there are more of them. Ministry of Natural Resources spokesperson Jolanta Kowalski says the official estimate is still, that there are 75,000 - 100,000 bears in the province (bears are notoriously hard to count, what with living in the woods and hibernating). But,



says Kowalski, there is no reason to think the 1999 cancellation of the spring bear hunt has caused bear numbers to soar.

Bears breed slowly, and take a while to get to breeding age, so the four years since the hunt was cancelled cannot have produced the population explosion which some people are reporting. More likely, said a recent provincial report, we're seeing more nuisance bears because a series of dry hot summers and warmer winters in the last years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century affected the bears' traditional habitat and their diet of berries, and because more of us are leaving food around, attracting the hungry bears.

Whatever the reason, it's wise to be prepared. Here are a few simple rules:

1. **DON'T LEAVE FOOD OR GARBAGE OUTSIDE, OR IN SCREENED PORCHES.** Store garbage in airtight containers inside a storage area not accessible to bears. If you must store garbage outside, use tightly sealed, steel, bear-proof containers. (one source near Lake of Bays is J.S.W. Manufacturing in Bracebridge, 705-646-2984). Store meat, poultry, and fish scraps in the freezer until you are ready to take them to the dump.
2. Wash garbage containers frequently and use powdered lime to cut odours.
3. Clean the BBQ grill as well as all the food containers in the recycling box
4. Put only vegetables and garden waste in the composter. Don't put in meat, poultry, or fish.
5. Don't let your dog chase bears.

And then there's the "what-to-do-when-you-meet-one" list:

1. Back away, watching the bear.
2. If a bear approaches you, stop and be aggressive. Shout, blow whistles, throw things. Never turn and run.
3. If the bear makes contact with you,

don't play dead. Fight back with a stick, a rock, or anything else you have.



The good news is, black bears attack very rarely. If you keep human space unattractive for them, you shouldn't have a problem.

The bear population may not be growing, but there really are more deer than there used to be: there are more than 300,000 deer in Ontario, by some estimates, triple what there was a quarter century ago, and development is driving deer to places where they previously were not seen; at one time, the sight of a group of deer feeding on the wooded shores of Bigwin Island in the middle of a summer day would have been unthinkable; now it's common, as they seek refuge from wide open spaces created by the golf course.

The sight of a doe and fawn in early morning mist, is breathtaking, but in a car, more deer mean more danger. The best advice here is slow down, especially at dusk and dawn. If you drive less quickly, you have more time to notice deer by the edge of the road. If you do see them, brace yourself: they are unpredictable, and



they're often in groups. The one you spot may bolt into the woods, but others could choose to jump in front of you. A single female deer standing in the middle of the road may be waiting for her fawn to come out of the woods.

As is true for most wild animals, you do deer no favour by feeding them. If you have cedar trees, or if you're a gardener, you may feel you're running a restaurant for white-tails, but that's not the problem: it's setting out grain to help them through winter that's a mistake. In his book *Algonquin Wildlife*, Norm Quinn explains that deer's

digestive systems are designed for the twigs that make up the better part of their diet; putting out grain can actually kill them, because its rich mix of starches and sugars can ferment in their stomachs and cause blood poisoning. For good information on winter feeding of deer, see www.gov.on.ca/MNR/pubs/deer2/pdf.

Turtles aren't cute and furry mammals, they won't come for feeding, and for sure no turtle will every bolt in front of your car, but they are definitely another Lake of Bays critter that is suffering at our hands. Turtles and cars are a very bad mix - for the reptiles. Turtles travel to search out places to lay eggs, and often mistake sandy road shoulders for a good place to do so; the proliferation of cars and roads has just made things worse for the slow-moving but fascinating animals.

Signs to alert drivers in turtle-crossing areas are becoming more common; some people take it on themselves to help them across the road and out of danger--a great idea, if it's done carefully--but beware, a snapping turtle is not likely to believe you're a friend and they can do some serious damage.

Fish, it's true, don't have many run-ins with cars, and even boats don't hurt them much. The great enemy of fish is golf courses and their intense use of chemicals to produce those perfect greens.





David Noakes, a professor of zoology at the University of Guelph, who specializes in fish habitat, says there is one basic thing for cottagers to remember when it comes to the environment: water runs downhill. "Whatever is put on their lawns, or poured down their drains, or comes out of their boat engines, winds up in the lake." Short term, it's bad for the fish. Long term, we'll all pay.

Ontario still has pretty high quality water and lots of it, Prof. Noakes says, but the European tradition has been to treat water as a sewer system and we're still a

little too close to that model. "Respect the water," he advises. "The lake is why you go there."

One of the problems with the proliferation of the bigger mammals like deer and bears and beavers, is that it gives us the idea that wildlife is flourishing in Muskoka, and that's really not true. Hundreds of species are on the decline, as our thirst for leisure and entertainment destroys natural habitat. Think of the deer who now venture closer to the shore during the day, as golf courses encroach on their traditional feeding areas. Think how we don't hear as many bullfrogs as we used to: there aren't the ponds for them there once were. And if they go, that's something less for herons to eat. Lawns and docks destroy the shoreline features fish need, and clearing trees and shrubs sends post-rain runoff rushing into the lake instead of percolating through the soil.

It is one of life's great paradoxes that we are so hard on the environment of the place we go to find nature.

