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A Bear Ponders My Edibility

The too-old-and-stringy hypothesis

Richard LeBlond



ONE DAY IN SEPTEMBER 2009, WHILE EXPLORING A BROAD ridgetop called The Battery in southern Labrador, I found an unusual habitat: isolated ponds in sandy and rocky soils where water levels went up and down with the groundwater. A botanist by trade, I was familiar with these habitats from Cape Cod to Florida. They are noted for their biological diversity and rare species, many of which are only seen when water levels are low.

Water levels were low on The Battery that September, and I was able to conduct a reasonable inventory of plant species at the first pond I saw. But much to my surprise and chagrin—even, perhaps, a modicum of terror—a black bear suddenly appeared on the shore of the second pond, rudely in the middle of my inventory. After an awkward assessment of intentions, or “interview” as John Muir called his black bear encounter, the bear escorted me out even though I was there first.

For almost twenty years, I made a living conducting natural habitat surveys in North Carolina. During that time, I had been confronted by a number of animated assailants, but never by a bear. I had been captured by marines on Camp Lejeune, eyed by swimming alligators too stupid to know how easy it is to overturn a Poke Boat, and attacked during seaside surveys by terns that employed both fore and aft gunneries; that is, jabbed my head with their beaks and despoiled my head with butt filth. I have been stopped short by a hissing, floating, gape-mouthed water moccasin while wading hip-deep in a pond. Until the Labrador bear, that was my most terrifying moment, as the body part most readily available for a water moccasin strike was my belly. I have been driven from habitat by sky-darkening mosquitos and airborne piranhas called deerflies. And I have been nibbled to distraction by chiggers and ticks. All are toothsome or beaksome aggressors who can penetrate the skin with oral parts, though the marines less frequently attack in this manner.

Among these predators, only the marines and alligators were capable of killing me on the spot. I escaped the marines the same way they found me, through a portal into a parallel universe. They were in training for war, and at rifle point ordered me to kneel on the savanna I had been surveying (for them), hands clasped behind my back. But because I was from a parallel universe, they could only pretend to capture, bind, and blindfold me.

Exploring this rare habitat—isolated ponds in sandy soil at low water level—Richard LeBlond began scanning the ground for plants, not expecting a black bear.

RICHARD LEBLOND

The alligators, as I said, are too stupid to realize I was as easy to get as a clam in an open shell, and with a whole lot more calories. The Poke Boat is a sort of kayak-canoe love child primarily used to fish quiet southern waters. I paddled the rivers and tidal creeks of southeastern North Carolina with the assurance of co-workers that gators do not attack things larger than themselves. The Poke Boat was 11 feet long, but local gators are known to grow to 14 feet, meaning I did not have full coverage under the assurance policy. I most frequently saw them swimming with just their snouts and eyes above water. Whatever their size, they always continued on their way. But being eyeballed by a swimming gator is always scary.

UNARMED, I WAS MOSTLY UNPREPARED FOR THE LABRADOR BEAR. I hadn't seen a bear of any breed in nearly twenty years, and never while walking alone in the wilderness. I knew black bears lived in Newfoundland and Labrador, but outdoors my thoughts had been of the polar bear, the largest terrestrial carnivore on earth. An adult polar bear can weigh 1,500 pounds, and these behemoths occasionally show up along the southern Labrador shore, even along the north shore of Newfoundland, having come south in spring to feed on newborn seals, and rarely floating in on summer icebergs.

At this point, I wasn't thinking about bears at all because I was a few miles from the Atlantic shore, and several hundred feet above it. (I thought I was out of polar bear habitat, but have since learned they venture inland in this region.) I do not commend stumbling on a black bear in the wilderness, but the tone and outcome likely would have been much different if it had been a polar bear. For starters, someone else would have written my obituary instead of my writing this.

The first pond, where I successfully inventoried plants, lies along Labrador's Route 510. It is called Funnel Pond, appropriate for its circular shoreline and up-and-down movement of the water. The second pond, which I now call Bear Pond, lies a little more than a half-mile in from the highway. A dirt road passes by its southern end, and I parked on a slope above the shore. This pond is linear, extending northward from where I parked for about a quarter-mile, and averaging about 200 feet wide. As at Funnel Pond, water levels were low, exposing a good half of the sandy and rocky pond basin below the shrub-bordered high-water shoreline.

I began my plant inventory heading north along the east shore, almost immediately seeing plants I hadn't seen at Funnel Pond, a good start. After about fifteen minutes and one-third of the way up the east shore, a beautiful



Richard LeBlond in the field on Newfoundland Island. KAREN PATTERSON

red fox suddenly appeared about 500 feet ahead of me. It never saw me and trotted around the north end of the pond, disappearing into the thicket on the slope above the west shore. Five minutes later, the bear appeared where the fox had entered the east shore—my shore. Only, this time I stood about 300 feet away.

The fox did not require my risk assessment and consideration of strategies, but the bear did. A bear's survey takes priority over that of an unarmed human. At first, the bear didn't see me, and, as the fox had, it headed away from me, about another 100 feet toward the pond's nearby north end. But as it turned to the west, it saw me and stopped. I had already stopped. It is said bears don't see well, but I was standing still and, now, maybe 400 feet away, it stared at me.

I cannot compare the feeling that comes in the gaze of a top-tier carnivore that is trying to figure out whether I pose a threat to body or territory or whether I would be suitable for dinner. The bear was doing what a dozen gurus had failed to do: bring me to total and continuous focus in the present. The great majority of what I felt was fear, but I also felt a bit of thrill, a heightened awareness that this was a very special moment in my life, whatever the outcome would be.

As I assessed my vulnerability and marshaled my options, the bear just stood there, its body facing west but its head turned south toward me. I slowly began to back up. But the pond's stony shore made walking difficult in the direction I wasn't looking, so I turned around and continued in a more sure-footed manner. I frequently looked over my shoulder to see what Mr. Bruin was up to (I'm assuming a male because no cubs were present), and he continued to stand still and watch me. The bear then ambled—a lumbering amble, bony and muscular—up the west shore slope and into the thicket where the fox had gone, disappearing from view. I guessed he was following an animal trail, not the fox, though knowing full well the fox was not far ahead.

Considering options was easy. I had so few. If he had charged, I would have thrown stones, the only weapons available. On the exposed pond shore lay every throwable size of stone in abundance. I mentally selected stone baseballs should the bear approach within 100 feet, and I planned to throw as many as quickly as I could, aiming for dead center. If those didn't stop it, I would hoist a heavier stone above my head and run at the bear, yelling. If I had to and if I could, I would give it a major league headache. I had thought about this should I ever be charged by a polar bear. This course of action seemed preferable to passively lying in the fetal position, as some wilderness experts recommend, while the bear chewed and clawed. And I would look as big as I could. Size is important to bears.

Experts commonly believe that black bears without cubs are less likely to attack than brown bears (grizzlies) and polar bears, and I was counting on this bear to heed those beliefs. But in truth, I didn't know what experts had recommended as the right action for an interview with a male black bear. Nor did I know the meaning of the various aspects of black bear behavior. I was in for a surprise when I finally had a chance to do the research.

More recently, I have learned that fully half of the fatal bear attacks in the United States and Canada during the past century were by black bears, who greatly outnumber the brown and polar bears. More surprising are the results of a study of black bear attacks conducted by scientists at the University of Calgary and reported by Cheryl Lyn Dybas in *Natural History* July–August 2011:

The team examined all sixty-three deaths in fifty-nine fatal incidents between 1900 and 2009 attributed to [wild black bears] in Canada and the U.S., including Alaska. Of fifty-six of those incidents in which they had sufficient information to analyze the attack, they determined that in forty-nine cases, or

88 percent, the attacking bear was exhibiting predatory behavior. In thirty-six of those attacks, the sex of the bear was conclusively known; thirty-three of those predators, or 92 percent, were male. A widespread assumption is that the riskiest encounter is with a mother bear with cubs, but in fact the bear to beware is a male looking for a meal.

AFTER THE BEAR DISAPPEARED INTO THE THICKET ABOVE THE WEST shore of the pond, I continued in a determined but less concerned manner toward the south end. My plant survey had been nullified, but as I neared the beginning of the trail that led up the open slope to my truck, I saw another plant species new to my list. As I knelt down to collect it, my peripheral vision detected movement behind my shoulder, and I turned my head to see that the bear was no more than 150 feet behind me. He had come down the west side of the pond undetected and was now walking on the exposed shore. The moment I looked at him, he turned to the east and stopped, facing his head toward me as he had done during the first encounter. (Again—so much for bears having poor eyesight.) I dropped the plant specimen, stood up, and began ascending the trail up the open slope—not running, but ready to run. About halfway up I turned to look, and was relieved to see he had not moved closer.

The bear's behavior suggested he was just curious, or maybe territorial. But I couldn't let go of the notion that it might have been a diner's curiosity, wondering whether he could afford the price of "today's catch." He might have considered me too old and stringy to have been worth the effort. He no doubt also recognized me as the species that threw things at him as he tried to retrieve good-smelling objects from garbage cans. We may have been of similar minds, unsure whether to fight or flee.

John Gimlette, in his book *Theatre of Fish* (Knopf, 2005), describes an encounter with a black bear at Nain in northern Labrador. It too seemed "undecided whether to run for it or eat me." Gimlette managed to slip away, but took with him the "sensation of being edible."

The young Winston Churchill wrote in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (Norton, 1989), "Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result." My response was more euphoric relief than exhilaration, but I now know the realm of which he spoke.

Safely in my Tacoma, I headed toward the highway. But with a rationally challenged decision, I stopped at Funnel Pond, where I had made the earlier plant inventory. I needed another specimen of a grass that had been difficult

to identify. This pond was only a half-mile from Bear Pond, a distance Mr. Bruin could have covered in a minute when running with purpose. I was as wary as a burglar in a house of thieves. The bear was already in my head, so I collected the grass and got out of there in a hurry.

AFTER RETURNING HOME FROM EASTERN CANADA, I LOOKED AT A FEW websites devoted to bear encounters. There seems to be general agreement that it is a good thing to let a bear know you are a human by waving your arms and talking in a quiet, calm voice (frankly, those actions seem contradictory to me). There is also general agreement that one should quietly back away while talking in that calm voice, apparently for as long as the bear is in view.

If the bear exhibits threatening behavior, the Center for Wildlife Information (centerforwildlifeinformation.org) recommends yelling and throwing sticks or stones. But the weapon of choice if the bear closely approaches is pepper spray. MountainNature (mountainnature.com) says it should be used only as a last resort, when the bear is within 15 feet. Beyond that and the spray is likely to be too dispersed to be effective. The website also recommends that the pepper canister be immediately discarded because the smell of pepper—contrary to spray in the eyes—is an attractant.

If a black bear physically attacks, some experts (such as those at bearsmart.com) advise fighting back with whatever is available, even punching it in the eyes and nose, while others (see americanbear.org) advise playing dead, but fighting back if the black bear bites.

I was surprised to learn my bear may have been exhibiting predatory behavior. According to the Center for Wildlife Information, “Any bear . . . that continues to approach, follow, disappear and reappear, or displays other stalking behaviors is acting in a predatory manner.” M. Sanjayan, a scientist for The Nature Conservancy, says, “It’s the way of all bears to practice sly and oblique approaches as a prelude to an attack.” Bears will also turn sideways to show a larger profile, as a warning. My bear had given me a sideways view at both encounters. I thought nothing of it at the time.

It was only later that I could comfortably consider why the bear didn’t eat me. For now, I’m going with the “too old and stringy” hypothesis. My bear was an epicurean.

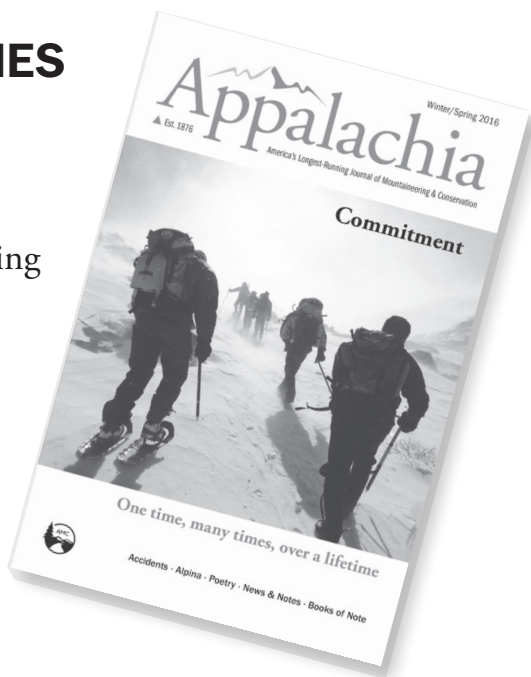
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