

# A plea to leave 'em be

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**O**ne day in December, just about dusk, a young stranger came to the door of the Trailhead Lodge in Upper Benson and requested to use the telephone. He spoke with an accent and seemed to be having a little trouble with his English. He explained that he and his companions were Norwegian and that they had just shot a black bear up on Three Ponds Mountain.

He wanted to call an American friend for help to transport the bear. I assisted him in finding the phone number and then dialed for him, as he was unfamiliar with our phone system.

He seemed rather proud of their accomplishment, so I asked him how large a bear they had shot. He told me it wasn't a very large bear. As I pressed him for more details, it turned out that what they had shot was a cub. This saddened me.

"Why did you shoot it?" I asked him.

I don't believe that this was the reaction he expected. I think that he felt they had done a heroic thing. Perhaps some people would think so and be impressed. My wife and I were not. He struggled with his answer, but essentially he said that they shot it because it was a bear.

I inquired as to what they were going to do with it. He, of course, wasn't sure. He agreed that bear meat is not really good to eat and that the hide would be too small to make a rug. Finally he concluded that they would probably have it stuffed. I didn't pursue the matter any further, as I didn't wish to seem inhospitable. He thanked us and left to hike back down to the trailhead to join his companions.

The thought occurred to me that it wouldn't make much of a trophy. Then I reflected on the value of making trophies from dead animal parts. I allowed that mounting specimens for educational purposes in a museum might have value, but further justification really requires a stretch of logic.

I have, in recent years, become opposed to hunting bears, particularly Adirondack black bears. I have spoken with several of my acquaintances about this very subject. They are all hunters, so I was surprised to discover that they have similar reservations.

I admit that these large furry creatures, with fearsome fangs and claws, are capable of doing terrible damage to a human being or livestock. I acknowledge that in some parts of the world, there are other species



Courtesy of the Adirondack Museum

A 19th-century hunter poses with trophy bear.

of bear that are dangerous and that people are justified in destroying them for their own protection. This, however, is not the case in the Adirondacks.

For the past 200 years, Adirondackers have been quite diligent about tracking down and killing any black bear that

showed any aggression toward humans or livestock. Given the breeding cycle of bears, that is many generations of bruins. Over time, aggressive bears have effectively been extirpated from the gene pool. The result is today's Adirondack black bear.

Now I'm not saying that our bears are

harmless, and they are certainly not tame. People should be aware of the potential danger and respect bears. But they are not monsters, either. Their primary daily purpose is to eat, and this they pursue with a passion. They are omnivores, which means that they will eat practically anything. Their keen sense of smell will detect anything that even resembles food. History shows that they do not place *homo sapiens* in that category.

There have been but a few documented instances of an Adirondack bear attacking a human in the past hundred years. Usually, it's the result of the human not respecting the bear's space. I recall hearing of an incident in which a woman discovered a bear pillaging her kitchen. Her reaction was foolish: She grabbed a frying pan and tried to drive the bear out. Of course, she was mauled.

Here are 10 do's and don'ts if you encounter an Adirondack bear:

1. Do remain quiet and back away. The bear will most likely do the same.
2. Don't run. Bears are predators. Running triggers the pursuit instinct.
3. Don't come between a sow bear and her cubs. Mothers are very protective.
4. Don't try to scare the bear. They don't scare.
5. Don't throw rocks at the bear. It annoys them.
6. If you think there is a bear nearby, make noise. The bear will avoid you.
7. Don't bathe. Your scent will offend him and he will avoid you. (I would.)
8. If a bear tries to steal your food, let him.
9. Do not feed the bears. Don't leave food around, and take care of your garbage.
10. Do leave the bears alone.

Bears are extremely intelligent creatures, in my opinion far too intelligent to be hunted as trophies. This alone is reason enough for me to not want to see them harmed. But there is more. As a game animal they do not qualify. Bear meat is not good to eat, unless you're desperate or have strange tastebuds. Bears do not overpopulate the forest. There are far too few of them remaining. Bears can live to the ripe old age of 40 or 45, but very few live past 10.

I know where there is a bear den, not far from the lodge. It's the residence of a black bear sow and her cub. Every fall, she dens there for her long winter sleep. I like knowing she is there. Just knowing that changes my small part of the world. I don't go near there, nor will I take anyone else there. She belongs there. I don't.

*John Washburn, owner of the Trailhead Lodge, writes a weekly column for the Hamilton County News, where this first appeared.*