

Wildlife Research Institute (WRI) Black Bear Field Study Course

I have attended two of Dr. Lynn Rogers' black bear field study courses. They afford a one-of-a-kind, up close experience of wild black bears that is often described as life-changing. What follows is a sort of chronicle describing my first experience attending a field study course in 2017.

Day 1, Sunday August 27th

It was an overcast Sunday in late August with a slight chill in the air. Shortly after turning down the road to the Northwoods Research Center Field Station about 14 miles from Ely, Minnesota, I saw a sign posted in big red letters on a tree: "No Hunting or Trespassing." Since I was a few minutes early, I got out of the car to take a picture. It isn't often I see signs like this.



Getting back in the car and driving ever-so-slowly, I spotted two deer on the left side of the road. I stopped and grabbed my point-and-shoot, fully expecting the deer to bound out of sight back into the woods. But they didn't! I was able to inch forward and get closer than I thought, even rolling down my window, before they ran away. It occurred to me that they weren't that scared because they knew they were safe here.



Upon seeing the intersection, I gauged whether it was too early to keep going to the Field Station. It was very close to 10:00, so I turned the corner after snapping a photo.



There were other cars parked close to the cabin (which is also the Field Station), so I found a spot near the shed where a van was parked. Slightly nervous because I didn't know what to expect, I climbed out of the car and walked to the deck where a couple of people were standing, and apologized for being a little early. I recognized Lorie as the Research Assistant from the website photo, and she told me I wasn't that early after all, people were already here, and she told me to get my things and go inside. I went back to the car and grabbed my backpack from the front seat and my travel bag from the trunk, lumbered inside, and set them on the floor on the side opposite the kitchen counter.



Standing by the window was a woman who I assumed worked there. I don't know why I thought that, because she had a nice SLR camera around her neck looking like a tourist. She just seemed to belong there. Kathy told me about her background as a volunteer for the North American Bear Center in Ely and I came to learn that she was the only one here besides me who had never taken the bear field study course. I hadn't expected to be the only real newbie in our class, never having taken the course or volunteered at the Bear Center.

I asked Kathy about sleeping arrangements, but she wasn't sure either, so we just hung out and kept our bags where they were. The cabin felt inviting and I marveled at all the bear stuff throughout! There were photos, knickknacks, books, and all things bear wherever you looked. Kathy directed my attention to the presence of a yearling, saying that the cub was very wary of people and had found a comfortable perch high up in a white pine. We stood in front of the large bay window and looked up but we couldn't see the cub from inside.

When I heard someone mention Lynn, I perked up and got a little nervous. Doc Rogers was already in the building, apparently upstairs! Our cook JM had been preparing lunch and they wanted him to come down to eat. Eventually he came down the stairs and walked past me as I feebly said something stupid like, "Nice to meet you," and started talking to Kathy because he already knew her. Then he turned around and we exchanged some words, but I can't recall what they were exactly. Immediately, I felt more at ease and was pleasantly surprised by his friendly and down-to-earth demeanor. I guess I was half-expecting a snooty or aloof professor type, but he was dressed in a loose T-shirt and jeans. Immediately, I took a liking to this man who had been a larger-than-life hero to me.

It was time to eat. We took our places around the large kitchen table and I ended up directly on Doc's left. He said something about no one wanting to sit next to him because they're scared, and we all laughed. JM had made me something a little different due to my vegetarian diet. All the food was fabulous. It turns out that all of us, including eight students, Lorie, and Doc sat in the same seats around the table throughout our stay there, as if they had been assigned. I guess that's because humans tend to be territorial.

I came to learn that Doc has some quirks. As he sat in the chair waiting for food to be set on the table, he leaned back holding his plate and rubbing it with his thumb remarking that it had dirt on it. It amused me and I also found it very endearing. He often ate like that too, cradling his plate next to his chest instead of leaning forward with his plate on the table like everyone else. I started doing it too, sometimes without realizing it, and we talked about how much more efficient it was to eat this way! You don't have to travel as far to get a bite. Periodically as we ate, he emanated a deep hum of

appreciation which I would later realize was akin to the sound of contented breathing a bear makes while munching on hazelnuts.

During lunch that first day, each one of us was to share a little bit about ourselves such as our background and what brought us to the bear course. He looked over at me and I asked if we were going to start with the person to his right, pointing to Alfredo. He said no, we were starting with me as everyone laughed. I'm not much of a public speaker. In fact, I get really nervous just introducing myself to a small group. However, I told everyone about my experience in Florida with the 2015 bear hunt and stood up to show everyone my shirt: orange on black, a bear paw imprint with "NOT FORGOTTEN" emblazoned in orange letters beneath. I teared up a bit as I recounted my experience as a bear hunt monitor. I knew these people would understand, and they did. I also made it a point to tell them I've never seen a bear in the wild, apart from when the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) released three yearlings which I made a YouTube video about, resulting in my being removed from the local bear stakeholder group.

Since we had been provided with a class list weeks before, I knew there would be three people from Italy in our class and another person from Florida named Carol. They weren't sure she would make it due to her husband's illness, but she did. David, from Washington state bordering Oregon, had just lost his beloved father and no one was sure he would make it either, but we were all pleased he decided to join us despite his grief. He was in the class last August as well. I was surprised to learn that so many people had been through the course 3, 4 or 5 times!

Shortly after lunch was our first lecture which I had been looking forward to. Doc had told us that he was glad he gave up touring and lecturing in favor of these field courses because now he no longer needed to travel so much. Our first lecture that Sunday afternoon was titled Black Bear Vocalizations and Body Language, complete with PowerPoint slides and short video clips.



Getting ready for a lecture from Doc Rogers at the Field Station

Doc told us he started studying black bears 50 years ago in the traditional “chicken” way, the way that he was taught: trap, tranquilize, get weights and mark with ear tags, eventually fitting radio collars as well. By working with locations and flying overhead, dots were placed on a map and, as he said, “...you think you know about bears.” He eventually learned that one must do it Jane Goodall’s way if one really wants to learn about bears. You have to see your subjects. He had done that with deer in his previous research with the U.S. Forest Service. He decided to try to get over his fear of bears and keep an open mind.



Radio telemetry data:
Dots on a map showing bear locations, each color representing one bear

He started by learning vocalizations and body language of bears. He noticed that none of the defensive behaviors of bears ended up in injury. For example, a narrow muzzle meant the bear was feeling anxious or scared. The blow-slap, bluff charge, or lunge

against a stick meant that a bear was scared and apprehensive but not enough to run away. He never heard of these displays resulting in an attack against a human. It was an epiphany moment when he realized that, despite their fear, the bears were showing restraint! They could have easily injured or killed him but had chosen not to. "They don't want to attack. They want to talk about it," he said. They're expressing fear, but it's all talk. Then he joked, "I never get hurt because if it's something dangerous, I have my assistant do it."

He discussed the techniques of walking with bears for 24 hours, inputting acronyms into field computers to monitor behaviors and vocalizations. This reminded me of my activities in Mexico in the late 1980s with The School for Field Studies, studying provisioned stump-tail macaques where we also used portable computers placed into clear plastic bags to protect them from the elements.

Doc explained that bear vocalizations are categorized into grunts and tongue clicks which occur between mothers and cubs, deep breaths which signal concern, huffing when they get over a scare, and the eerie humanlike voice mourning a missing cub. The moan of fear, often heard in treed bears, is often misinterpreted as a growl, although it sounded nothing like a growl to me. He stated that he has never heard a black bear growl or seen one snarl. Black bears do not show their teeth when they feel threatened. It is captive bears that are trained to bare their teeth for dramatic effect in photos and movies.

Doc also stated that once bears lose their fear of a human, often called habituation, they tend to ignore that person and go about their business, treating that person like part of the scenery. I came to learn that the phrase, "bears become dangerous when habituated to humans" makes no sense for at least two reasons. One reason is that bears, just like people, can learn to trust an individual human as many bears have come to trust Lynn Rogers. The second reason is that "habituation" is not exactly what wildlife agencies purport it to be. They assume that bears are just waiting for the opportunity to attack a human and would do that if only they were "habituated." That sounds ridiculous thinking about it now, but this is the message they communicate to the public about bears on a regular basis.

Folklore plays a part in our primal fear of bears. Bears have been demonized as have mythical dragons, which were slain in an effort to prove human courage. Images like Smokey the Bear have confused matters, contributing to conflicting messages about bears. However, despite human fear of bears, facts do not lie. For every person killed by a black bear, 2 are killed by a grizzly, 13 are killed by a snake, 45 are killed by a domestic dog, 120 are killed by a bee, 249 are killed by lightning, and 60,000 are murdered by another human. Put another way, one in a million black bears kills a person, whereas one in 18,000 people kills another person. Intraspecific aggression is

what people should be concerned about, which is why he feels safer in the woods than anywhere else.

There have been only 61 killings by black bears since the year 1900. Most black bear attacks are defensive in nature with one in a million being predatory. No one knows exactly why black bears attack this way, but there is an emerging pattern. It seems these predatory attacks occur in regions where bears and humans rarely cross paths, in remote areas such as Canada and Alaska where bears have the least amount of contact with people. That fact bolsters his findings regarding habituation. A bear will not attack something considered part of the scenery.

A possible explanation of predatory bear attacks is that two unique subspecies exist: one in the northern conifer forest whose primary concern is not starving to death; the other in the southern deciduous forest where the primary concern is the avoidance of predators. Within each of these ecosystems, selective pressures differ. Up north, the willingness to assess risk vs. benefits prevails. He told us that no one has yet tested this plausible hypothesis.

Wildlife agencies, unfortunately, are all about enhancing the innate human fear of bears as they promote hunting and the running of hunting hounds. Over 55,000 bears per year are killed by people in North America during hunting seasons. A study in Ontario found an approximate 13% wounding rate where 5,000-6,000 black bears slowly die or heal after being shot. None of this surprised me, since I had been immersing myself in bears over the course of two years and learning through other people, books, and journal articles in my spare time.

Black bears have evolved as prey species, which helps to explain their shy nature. Genetic evidence demonstrates that black bears have been around North America for 5 million years. Living alongside such ice-age predators as the dire wolf, saber-toothed cat, and the giant short-faced bear which weighed over a ton, the black bear was no match and adapted by fleeing up a nearby tree. Now, the remaining enemies of the black bear include the timber wolf, the brown bear, and the human. "I saw a black bear—I ran one way and the bear ran the other" is something that Doc Rogers has heard a lot. The cautious posturing of black bears is often misconstrued as stalking. If you run into a bear and say, "Hi! I'm a human," the bear will usually either run away or be relieved you're not another bear.

The primal fear of bears runs deep, but Doc Rogers has paved the way toward better understanding of the true nature of bears. Many people come to these field courses to get over their fear of bears. Once they are introduced to a bear, those fears begin melting away. To illustrate, some of us parked up the road, about a quarter of a mile away from the cabin. Despite the property being graced with the presence of bears,

many of whom are quite large, none of us felt our lives were in danger as we walked back and forth from our cars, whatever time of day it was.

We received a phone call from a neighbor named Larry. Seventeen year old Donna and her three cubs showed up, along with Braveheart and her three cubs. We all piled into the van and Doc drove us over. I sat in the back as the van pulsed along on narrow, unpaved roads through the woods, jostling us in our seats, the scraping and tapping of branches on either side of us.



Donna and her three cubs



Two of Donna's cubs in a white pine

Once we got there, we walked to the back yard where at one end stood a stately white pine. I was spellbound watching Donna and her three cubs Bella, Bandit, and Banjo (who were later renamed). They repeatedly climbed up and down the tree effortlessly, seemingly very cautious but not so afraid that they ran away back into the woods just beyond the property.

I learned that black bears in Minnesota prefer to use white pine trees for climbing, so mother bears try to den near a large one whenever possible. The rough, furrowed bark makes this tree much easier to climb than smoother-barked trees, and the large, sturdy branches afford ample climbing and perching opportunities. The bark of the red pine, while also easy to climb, sloughs off too easily making it hard for bears, especially cubs,

to gain stable footing. The foliage of the white pine also helps keep the bears cool in the summer by providing shade. Climbing is an essential skill that black bear cubs learn very quickly from their mothers after emerging from the den, in order to avoid predators. Larry believed that Donna kept her cubs close to the white pine these last couple of days because there had been a wolf spotted in the area. Wolves have been known to prey on bear cubs.

The Eagles Nest Township is well-known as a bear-feeding community. Over a dozen residents have been feeding local bears since 1961. Data from a study published by Doc Rogers showed that complaints about bears in and around Ely fell by more than 80% in the 1980s through a practice known as diversionary feeding. Food is placed in specific locations which decreases the bears' likelihood of feeding from garbage cans or breaking into structures when natural foods are in short supply. In the Kawishiwi Campground within Superior National Forest, researchers found that diversionary feeding over a six year period decreased nuisance complaints by an astounding 88%. However, many people in Eagles Nest do not practice diversionary feeding or feed bears for these reasons. They just do it to see bears up close because they enjoy seeing bears. Sounds like my kind of place!



After we left Larry's, we returned to the cabin for dinner. I couldn't believe how delicious the food was and how attentive JM was to my dietary preferences. No matter what she prepared, it came out tasting so much better than anything I ever made for myself back home. After dinner, the bears really started coming around the cabin and many of us took pictures and observed them as they each went about their business of being a bear...looking for food, climbing a tree, and sometimes interacting with each other. That cautious yearling that had been hanging out all day wasn't quite sure if he wanted to be up the tree or to venture closer to the cabin to get a bite to eat.



Cautious yearling

The observation of bears continued for many of us well into the night. I finally went to my assigned bedroom on the first floor near the kitchen around 11 pm but my roommate Kathy was already asleep. I crawled into bed but slept fitfully, getting up repeatedly to put on another layer of clothes, because I wasn't used to the cool weather and all I had was a sheet. It wasn't until the next morning that I discovered there had been plenty of blankets provided for us in the closet near the foot of my bed. At least I wouldn't be cold tonight, I thought.

Day 2, Monday August 28th

Shortly before breakfast which came at around 8:30, Doc picked up some bear scat so that those of us who had never done so had the opportunity to sniff it! Setting foot on the deck with a couple other classmates, I hesitatingly and carefully sniffed, inching my nose closer and closer to his hand as Doc promised he would not shove it deliberately into our faces. Surprisingly, it smelled quite pleasant!

After breakfast, Doc decided it might be a good time to go out on the pontoon boat! We got into the van and he drove us to the dock. Once parked, it was just a short hike to the water's edge. Single-file, we walked onto the pontoon and took our seats, a few brave souls daring to sit near the yellow-jackets which had apparently taken refuge on the boat, having built a nest near the stern. I sat in the middle and endured intermittent visitations from the residents, much to my chagrin. Carol and Alfredo were among the bravest, as can be seen in the photo below. No one in our group wanted to harm them, so we took them for a ride!

Despite it still being overcast, it was a very pleasant trip and we saw lots of wildlife: mallards, a bald eagle, and at least a couple of loons. David and Kathy took some amazing close-ups, but I just foolishly sported a GoPro on my head. Kathy pointed out

wild rice growing on the banks, and Tracy was teasing David about wanting to take pictures of it, joking that he would get home and wonder why he took pictures of weeds growing by the water's edge.



Wild rice can be seen in the center of this photo.



Lily and Hope's old den site which was so close to the lakeshore

During our ride, Doc told us one of his stories as we idled by the banks of Lily's old den site. When Doc tells a story, it tends to be fascinating and protracted and, my memory being poor, I forget the many details which I regret. His stories grant an inside look into the heart and mind of a pioneer bear biologist, the trials and tribulations that he has endured over his five decades of research. Not the least of these challenges includes having to deal with the state's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Having had experience with Florida's equivalent, the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), I was familiar with their agenda and the pervasive corruption inherent in these government institutions.

We had gotten a phone call from JM saying that lunch was going to be ready soon, and Doc responded that we would be there in about 20 minutes. Nearly an hour later, we received another phone call about lunch being cold, and we sheepishly headed back for our late meal as his story came to an abrupt end. While my stomach was growling, I was sorry we had to head back!



Doc Rogers driving the pontoon boat with Carol and Alfredo looking on

After lunch, Lorie took us on a short trail hike to see natural bear foods and to view two nearby bear dens. The trails were green and lush, and we all enjoyed the leisurely hike. Lorie pointed out the different plants, trees, and bear foods.



A couple of my classmates were eager to climb down into the dens. Alfredo and 16-year-old Letizia most notably were fearless and climbed right in. People were asking me if I was going to go down into the dens, and I nervously said I wasn't sure. It isn't that I'm claustrophobic; it is more a fear of being in close quarters with insects and spiders that gets me anxious. Despite having jumped out of an airplane once, I also have a huge fear of heights and the terrain was especially slippery due to the recent rains. Carol seized the opportunity to tell me, multiple times, that I would regret it if I didn't do it. I knew she was right and finally, with her persuasion and other people encouraging me, I took the plunge. This happened twice, once at each of the dens.

The first was the scarier of the two because of the slippery rocks leading down into the den. I wasn't sure where to put my foot on the descent, but there didn't seem a lot of choices. I slowly edged my way down, making sure I had a firm grasp on the sides before placing my left foot on the mossy rock below. It seemed to take forever and I broke into nervous laughter as I envisioned losing my footing and embarrassingly plummeting down to the bottom, perhaps 8 feet below, and hitting my head on the protruding rock. I asked the group if I should just let go and jump, but I was too scared so I kept inching down. Once I was down there, it was easy to envision a bear getting cozy and warm, a mother keeping her little cubs sheltered throughout the long, bitter cold northeastern Minnesota winter.



Alfredo was one of the bravest, delving into the bear dens (once we got the "all-clear" from Lorie!). Notice the trail cam on the tree in the picture below.



This dirt den reminded me of a huge gopher tortoise burrow!

After our excursion out in the field, we headed back to the cabin, but not for long. Doc received a phone call from a friend named Charlie telling him that Shadow was on their property. Shadow is a very important bear! She is the matriarch of what is known as “Shadow’s Clan.” Born in 1987 to an unknown mother, she has created quite the extensive family tree, including many individual research bears that have provided Doc Rogers with a plethora of information into the private life of bears. Sadly, too many of these lives have been taken by hunters, but Shadow herself has survived 30 hunting seasons, a remarkable feat, and had many litters of cubs, the last one being 2015 when she gave birth to one surviving cub named Spanky.

We watched from inside Charlie’s house way up high looking out from the expansive kitchen windows as she slowly, somewhat arthritically it seemed, walked back into her woodland home. We were hoping she would den soon. In fact, we wished that for all the bears, as hunting season was fast approaching. In her den, she would be safe from the wrath of the flying bullets and arrows of hunters, and she might even emerge with cubs again next year.



Shadow enjoying an afternoon snack

Dinner followed our visit with Shadow, and it was scrumptious. I looked forward to mealtimes at the cabin. It gave us a chance to talk with class members, Doc Rogers, Lorie, and JM about bears and our experiences and observations about the bears. It also gave us a chance to hear another of Doc’s remarkable stories. I learned that his wife Donna was a Medical Technologist by trade as I am. Jokingly, he asked me if I would be able to take a bear’s blood if he held it down and, somewhat embarrassingly, I told him that I don’t practice phlebotomy and wasn’t very good at it. This reminded me of the true story that tour guides would tell to guests at Big Cat Rescue in Tampa about a veterinarian being able to take blood from Bengali the tiger’s tail as it stuck out of the enclosure while the other staff members and volunteers distracted him with enrichment.

In retrospect, I regretted not having mentioned that, but I suspect it is a common story among zookeepers and the like.

During dinner, a phone call interrupted Doc's dinner as sometimes happened, and during the course of their conversation, he kept addressing the person on the line as "Steve." I wondered if it could be the famous bear biologist, author, and president of WildWatch, Stephen Stringham, PhD who lives in Alaska. It turned out that it was, and I couldn't believe I was sitting here next to the famous Lynn Rogers who was having a casual conversation with his friend Stephen Stringham while at the dinner table!

Dr. Stringham had testified at the emergency hearing for an injunction to stop the Florida black bear hunt in the fall of 2015, where a local environmental group, Speak Up Wekiva, had sued the FWC. It was almost laughable how the FWC and its lawyers discredited the world-renowned bear expert because he "doesn't know about Florida bears." As Doc so accurately pointed out, those of us sitting around the table know far more about bears than do the state wildlife agency so-called "bear biologists," most of whom only work with tranquilized bears.

After losing the suit, Chuck O'Neal of Speak Up Wekiva organized the formation of bear hunt monitors, of which I was one of 100 or so, with my friend Katherine. Our job was to document through whatever means, take photos, and count the dead bears brought into the hunter check stations throughout Florida, reporting hourly to a central location. The object was to stop the hunt once the numbers reached near quota. We witnessed lactating mothers being brought in, as well as underweight cubs. Despite breaking the law, most of the hunters were not even issued citations. In fact, many an FWC official, from law enforcement personnel to bear biologists, slapped the hunters on the back and shook their hands, congratulations for a job well done.

Bear observation and photography around the Field Station's observation deck followed dinner. That is, until we got another call from Larry after nightfall. Donna, Braveheart, and their cubs as well as some yearling cubs including Jewel's, had paid a visit to their house! Would we like to come see them? Yes, of course! We all piled into the van and headed over there. Although it was dark, we were able to see quite well because of the flood lights in the backyard.

This was the setting in which David and a bear he called Nipper began forming a bond. David named Nipper and his siblings Dipper and Do. We learned that a young bear sometimes lacks the manners of a more seasoned black bear, hence the name. We weren't sure who their mother was, but they are at that age when cubs are tossed out of the close-knit family group to strike out on their own, having spent two winters together. Often, this event termed "family breakup" is a very trying and traumatic time for the cubs, and their mother may be experiencing conflicting feelings of wanting to take care

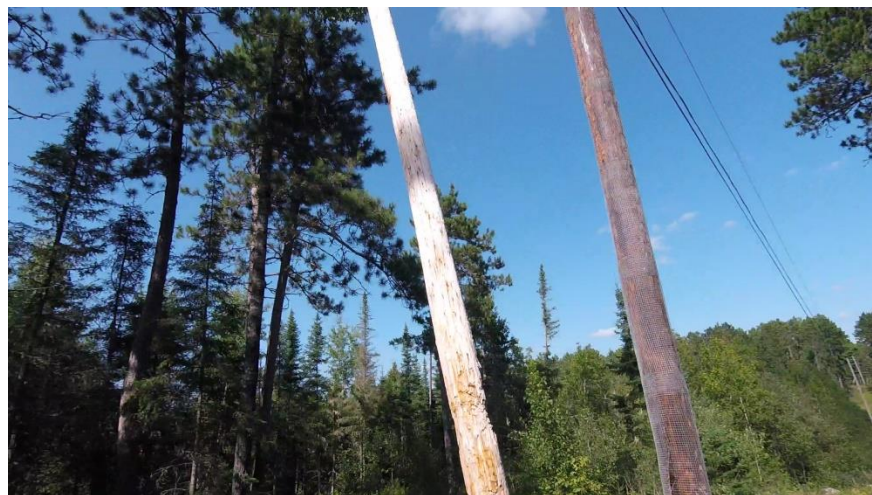
of her cubs, yet heeding the call of the promise of a new life commencing, beginning with meeting a handsome male and eventually culminating in having a new family of cubs.

Day 3, Tuesday August 29th

After breakfast, Lorie gave us a short presentation about bear sign, marking, tracks, scat, and seasonal natural bear foods in preparation for a field trip. I was so excited to go out in the field again, seek out bear sign, and learn about wild bear foods. In Florida, I had learned that bears have many different wild foods to choose from but have their favorites depending on the season. The same is true in Minnesota, although the plants and trees are of course different.

Lorie told us that bears walk efficiently, which is sometimes called “perfect walking,” because their rear feet track their front feet. The rear foot falls near or slightly in front of the front foot, which is called an overstep walk. Evidently, sometimes these longer tracks made by front/rear foot combinations lead to exaggerated claims of track sizes. Bears have a tendency to walk with their toes pointed inward, which is commonly referred to as being pigeon-toed. This knowledge gives me renewed pride as I am pigeon-toed too!

We learned that on bear trails, bears often do what is called a “stomp walk,” compacting the soil with their feet as they go. This prevents the growth of vegetation, thereby making a bear trail which they prefer to use repeatedly. This is one way that bears can mark their territory. She talked about how Colleen had been observed stomping and sniffing. She would stomp with one front foot and then bring her foot to her nose to sniff, and then stomp with the other foot, sniffing each time she stomped. Other ways that bears mark is by scratching on trees and poles on their well-worn paths. Bears do not randomly mark trees. Apparently, they do prefer utility poles!



The original utility pole (left) was kept in place for the bears, while the new

pole was entirely lined with mesh wire to discourage bears from biting it.

Another sign to look for is what are called straddle trees: small trees lying on their side with branches broken or twisted, which bears urinate on to mark. When we went out to look for sign, we were able to see examples of all of these because Lorie knew exactly where to take us to find them quickly.



Straddle tree

After lunch, Doc gave us a lecture titled “Use of Webcams to Document Denning Activities of Undisturbed Wild Black Bears.” Up until the placement of webcams in eight different bear dens, no one knew exactly what went on inside the dens since there was no way to monitor the dens continuously. Observer effects were also a problem up until that time, with den abandonment being the worst effect of all. In the 1990s, webcams came along and solved those problems, enabling researchers to have continuous access to bear behavior in the den all winter. A hurdle in those early years included being able to take a picture every 15 seconds but having no way to archive the pictures. Another problem was the continuous hum generated by interference from the mic on the webcam, which was solved by installing a separate microphone. In the year 2000, the film “The Man Who Walks with Bears” was released, documenting much of this work accomplished by Doc Rogers and his team.

That evening, we headed back to Larry’s to visit with Donna and the cubs, as well as a few yearlings. We marveled at the way Donna disappeared, leaving her cubs in our capable hands as she went off to do whatever it is she needed to do. This kind of demonstration of trust is not unheard of. A photographer who spends many hours in the woods observing black bears has spoken of similar experiences, where a mother bear would leave her cubs for him to babysit for a number of hours. At Larry’s, David and Nipper met for the last time this visit. They truly seemed to understand each other and I

sort of envied their special relationship. I would miss Donna and her cubs, Braveheart and her cubs, and all the other bears that visited these kind people within Eagles Nest Township.

Later, Carol took me to see the WRI library which I had wanted to see, but I wasn't quite sure how to get there. Located on one end of the 3rd floor, it is an impressive collection of books and periodicals all things bear and beyond. Every step of the way, the walls are lined with Doc Rogers' professional photography of bears and other wildlife. Out the window, the view is nothing short of spectacular.



Final Day, Wednesday August 30th

Finally, the day I had been dreading. After breakfast, we all drove in our separate vehicles to meet at the Bear Center. We congregated in preparation for a behind-the-scenes tour to meet the Center's four ambassador bears: Ted, Lucky, Holly, and Tasha. We were fortunate enough to witness Doc Rogers interact with Ted whose trust of humans far surpasses expectations. This is because Ted was born in captivity and raised by humans. Unfortunately, he had not been feeling well and did not greet us at the fence. Rather, Doc went to visit him and many people snapped photos of the sweet interaction between Bear Man and bear. After that, we briefly went to visit Lucky in his personal enclosure.

There was also a live broadcast which was given by the Director of Education, Judy Thon. We stood outside on the observation deck and watched Holly and Tasha while Judy explained about their backgrounds and their behaviors as they tackled their enrichment toys and played in the pond within the 2.5 acre enclosure.

Afterwards, some of us stayed a while to walk through the Bear Center, watch some of the video monitors, and read bits of the extensive information at the exhibits, which represents the culmination of 50 years of bear research. Doc asked some of us if we wanted something to eat, but we all declined and went our separate ways. Some of us had flights to catch. I had a long drive ahead to Minneapolis before my flight back to Florida the following day. A few of us had talked of plans to do it again next year, and we fortified those plans and vowed to keep in touch before parting ways. On my way to Minneapolis, I shed a few tears. It wouldn't be the last time...