

BEAR HUNTING ON BLACK MOUNTAIN

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Old Billy Robinette (1824-1898 – born on Stone Mountain near High Knob – the father of “Preacher” Billy Robinette [1856-1934]), who lived at Huff Rock & Cracker’s Neck in the late 19th century, took a cap and ball rifle and walked to High Knob, and killed seven bears. The middlings were so thick that a case knife would not reach though.

Black bears are a part of who we are. Union High School’s mascot is the “bear”, and that of adjoining Harlan County High School is the “black bear”. It is no accident. We were once the black bear capital of the world.

Napoleon’s armies wore bearskin hats. The skins came from Eastern Kentucky. The Long Hunters hunted deer for their hides, but they lived off of bears. David Copperfield dressed his hair in bear grease. Indians slept on their skins, and the passengers in horse drawn vehicles used them for warmth.

It is no accident that a map of the prevalence of black bears overlays the map of the distribution of the American Chestnut. Both of these maps lay up and down the Appalachian Mountain chain.

One out of every four trees in the Appalachians was a chestnut. It is estimated that there were three billion of them. The very center of this biosphere was right where we are. The amount of food produced was unimaginable. The American chestnut was the best chestnut in the world, beating both the Oriental and European varieties. Many people have said that during the fall that a person could walk on the fallen chestnuts and never touch the ground. Bears, deer, elk, and squirrels thrive as never since.

The chestnuts died out from the blight in the 1930’s, and the last bear were shot out in the 1950’s. Bears were reintroduced about 1970, and are thriving here again.

Bears have the lowest ratio of intestines to body weight of any local game animal. Nature has made this choice so that the bear can run without having to carry around a lot of guts. The bear is all muscle. It is the strongest animal in the eastern United States. To compensate for this shortage of digestive capacity, the bear is always eating. In this respect, he most closely resembles the hog and the human. All three animals will eat almost anything.

The bear will graze like a cow, eat insects like a skunk, eat carrion like a vulture, and is a major predator of deer and sheep. It will climb trees and break out the upper limbs gathering in the acorns to his mouth. He will stand on his rear feet and gather in armfuls of black berry and Russian Olive stems. He will dig out ground bee or yellow jacket nests. He will bite pine tree saplings on the trunk at his standing height in order to make them ooze sap, which he lets dry into rosin balls, which he will come back weeks later and eat. He will eat a rosin ball the last thing before he goes into hibernate, which will plug his rectum, and which he passes the first thing when he awakens in the Spring.

He is near sighted, has average hearing, but can smell a strong scent from six miles away if the wind is right.

The bear conceive in the fall, and run off their offspring that were born the February before last. They give birth while hibernating. The cub hibernates with its mother the first winter. The sow breeds only every other year. The boar bear lives alone. During warm days in the winter he may emerge from hibernation for a day or two, only to resume hibernation when the weather gets cold again. A bear can get into any hole in a hollow tree that it can get its head through.

The local Indian and pioneer method of getting a bear was to trap one in a bear pen. There are hollows all around named "Bear Pen Hollow". The Imboden tipple was in one. Another was in Norton at the intersection that turns up to the Cancer Center. It is now given a more elegant name - Hawthorne Drive. A bear pen was built like a log house about the size of a hog pen, but placed underground to keep the bear from breaking out. There was a triggered dead fall gate baited with a piece of rotten meat.

Laws governing hunting vary greatly from one jurisdiction to another. When I first started going to Canada there was no bear season. They were shot at garbage dumps like rats. The Canadian old timers hunted them to get rid of them, and used huge jawed spring loaded traps. The method of hunting was to identify a bear's customary trail by finding a line of rosin balls on young pine trees, and by looking for the round stones left by glaciation, and which had been rolled over by bears looking for insects. You could tell if a stone had been rolled over by how wet the moss was that clung to the former top of the stone, and was now rolled over so that it was on the bottom.

Out west a common practice was to buy a poor cow and lead it up into the mountains, and shoot it. A couple of weeks later bear would likely have found it by its smell. That is becoming illegal in more and more jurisdictions as people have changed from the old pioneer stock to urbanites. Baiting bear with corn is common here in the east, but is illegal. However, baiting with a smelly liquid which the bear cannot eat is legal. Logs are frequently sprayed with things like creosote and soured grape juice laced with licorice.

In Virginia, the legal and customary method of bear hunting is with hounds. The hunter needs a very large tract of private land to do so, because this type of hunting usually involves a motorized vehicle. It used to be done on foot, but few people are tough enough to do this anymore. Motorized vehicles are illegal on government land. At its most highly developed practice, four wheel drive pickup trucks have dog boxes built into their beds, and may contain as high as six or so dogs. A metal jump cage is attached to the front bumper, and the dog with the best nose and most experience is chained in it. The rig is driven back and forth across the mountain until the 'jump dog' howls. Its owner makes a judgment call on just how excited that dog is, and inspects the ground for bear tracks to see how big the bear is, and how recent it has passed. He may turn out a few of his trail dogs from the dog box. Somehow, a dog can usually tell which direction the bear was travelling, and they take off after it. The closer they get to the bear, the more they howl. If they break into a dead run after the bear, the hunters will 'pack in more dogs', or turn out a specialized 'treeing dog'. This sort of dog usually does not have a very good nose, but has the suicidal disposition of a kamikaze pilot.

Young bears will run for many miles before a pack of hounds. A middle aged bear will take to a tree, and an older bear will 'bay', or stand and fight on the ground. Dogs frequently are severely injured or killed in this process.

The special features of bear hunting on Black Mountain are determined by the many strip mine highwalls, which bears can navigate, but pickups cannot. Roads are often barred, and trucks cannot pass. For these reasons, an ATV is substituted for a pickup, and have strike dogs carried in their luggage racks. The main food sources specific for Black Mountain are poke berries, which grow in timbered cuts, and Russian Olives, which were once used to reclaim strip mines. Bear hunting is also complicated by the fact that the northern half of Black Mountain is in Kentucky, and Kentucky takes a very dim view of bear hunting. Bears seem to understand this, and when jumped in Virginia they often run into Kentucky.