

The Case for Animal Literacy



Yesterday morning I brought a bag of trash out to the small trash shed we had built next to our home. I was greeted by the site of the previous week's trash (three bags) strewn all over our path and a gaping hole in the lattice work on the side of the enclosure. The formerly tied, now totally destroyed and ripped open bags and their contents were outside but the plastic trash can that they had been in was still inside the trash shed. The plastic 45 qt. trash can now resembled a giant crushed soda can. Obviously one of our ursine neighbors had paid us a nocturnal visit. It should be noted that almost everyone here in Lake in the Clouds has seen a bear or bears over the last few years. Everyone except me. Oh, I've seen our vandalized trash bin (assaults seem to happen about once a year), I've seen paw prints near the house both in the snow and in the dirt. I've seen bear scat in the back yard. I've even seen a deposit of bear poop on our front walk way in front of our front door.....must have been upset that there was no garbage available. But no, none, nada, bear sightings for yours truly. Neighbors have stopped me during my early morning run to say they saw a bear "up ahead". My wife saw one driving to work. I was running at the time and she worried that we might meet. People have even said "I saw a bear running across your lawn". I didn't see it. It was probably running so I wouldn't see it. Now, don't get me wrong. I've seen bears up here. Five years ago, shortly after we moved up here, I was down at our dock enjoying a Zen moment being at one with the early morning, sweet smelling stillness of nature. The mist was rising off the lake. The lake was still and mirrored the trees and sky. I heard rustling among the blue berry bushes behind me. Being used to deer wandering around, I turned to see if perhaps it was a gentle fawn come to share the beauty of nature with me. No, it was the biggest black bear ever to set foot on the earth. A monster! It blocked out the sky! Well, not really. The reason it was so big was it was about fifteen feet away from me. I had been standing still and the *Ursus americanus* was so interested in blue berries that it hadn't noticed that I was there on the dock. I had seen bears on television, I had seen bears in zoos. The ones in zoos always had a moat or bars between me and the bear. This time there was nothing between me and the bear but three blue berry bushes and an upside down bucket. What to do? Intellectually I understood that black bears will attack humans if a cub is threatened but not otherwise. Had this bear received that memo? Had the bear read the memo? I was a victim of animal illiteracy! I was, shall we say, nervous. Returning to the house was out of the question. The bear was between me and the house. Fighting it off with the bucket didn't seem like a good idea. I resolved to get in our fishing boat and paddle with my arms (the oars were five feet closer to the bear than I was. I thought of asking the bear to bring them over to me but.....) out into the lake and safety. It occurred to me that our lake is not deep and the bear could have just walked out after me, and

additionally, even if I got to the deep parts of the lake, bears can swim. Note: during all this mental furor and angst the bear still had not noticed me. I resolved to take my chances with the boat. As I stealthily loosened the bungie cords that tethered the boat, I must not have been too stealthy, (it's hard to be stealthy when your hands are shaking) and rattled the metal hooks of the cord against the metal boat. This gave the bear a start and the noise frightened him (her?) so that it moved (slowly) about forty more feet off to the right as I stood stock still hoping I hadn't angered the beast by interrupting breakfast. Should I continue my efforts to untie the boat and sail to relative safety? Or, since the bear was no longer between me and the house, could I get back to the house? By this time, one bungie cord was caught in my sweat pants and another was wrapped around my shoe, one leg was in the boat, the other on the dock and the boat was drifting away from the dock. In a few seconds I would either have a very high voice or be very wet. I opted for the land. I stealthily (stealth is the operative word with a bear nearby) and got back on the dock and tied up the boat, quickly. I walked very slowly up the path towards the house. I had read that running with a bear nearby is not a good idea. If bears were literate they would have read that a human running meant it was leaving the area. I saw the bear. The noise of my not so quietly getting entangled in bungie cords and becoming almost fissured longitudinally between the boat and the dock must have alarmed it and so it was hiding behind a tree. It must have been a "Special Ed" bear since just the head was behind the tree and the rest of it was sticking out for all the world to see. Since I could watch it as I made my way to sanctuary, I tiptoed up to the house. I got to the house, awakened my wife, got the camera and took some pictures. So, I've seen bears but just not recently. Perhaps they are afraid of me and my bungie cords?

Anyway, back to the issue of animals and reading. When we first built the trash enclosure, it was all lattice work on three sides. The first bear invasion, witnessed by my mother-in-law, occurred early one morning. I went out to our deck and noticed a plastic bag in the woods off to the right of our home. I immediately started thinking "who's the slob that left garbage out?" when my mother in law, said "a bear carried it over there". The bear had gone through the wooden lattice like the college football team going through a paper banner during introductions at the homecoming game. I checked the trash, it looked like Galveston after Hurricane Ike. After cleaning up, I called our contractor (note: I am inept with tools, in fact the state legislature has passed a law forbidding me to come within fifteen feet of a power tool) to see what repairs could be effected. He put up rows of wooden spindles around the entire enclosure while assuring me that the three foot high spindles were high enough. "Bears can't climb up and over them". So! Animals obviously never read that memo. The most recent assault featured the bear climbing up and over them, crashing through the lattice work, crushing the trash can and then taking the garbage bags **BACK UP AND OVER THE 3FT. HIGH SPINDLES**, so it could dine at its leisure. There was a second memo that the bear didn't read. Campers have said that a bowl of Pine Sol placed outside their tent will keep bears away. For a year I had faithfully replenished the Pine Sol and believed it was keeping the beasts at bay. This bear not only ignored the Pine Sol, it chewed off the nozzle of the spray bottle I used to refill the bowl and then crushed the bottle just like the trash can. So, animal literacy is high on my list. And while we're at it, how about the deer? Shouldn't they be taught to read the lists of plants that are "deer resistant"? Shouldn't they be able to read the labels of deer repellents and know they are supposed to avoid

them? Shouldn't they be able to read Deer Crossing signs so that they know where to cross the road? And the copperhead that was sunning itself on the road by my mailbox? A literate copperhead would have read that copperheads don't go up to an altitude of 1,900 ft – Lake in the Clouds. Obviously, animal illiteracy is at the root of the damage caused by many animals. If they learned to read they would know where to stay and what not to eat or break. As for our trash enclosure, it is now surrounded by enough thick wood to support an oil well. It has guard towers with search lights. The guards, armed with Uzis are on 24 hour alert. I was going to put up signs that said “Bears Keep Out” but, alas they can't read.