

Are dogs “saviours” or are they contributing factors in black bear attacks on people?

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We have been reading with interest about owners who claim they have been saved by their dog during a black bear attack. Though that may have been true in some instances, was it possible that the presence of the dog(s) was the reason why some black bears attacked their owners in the first place?

Since 2010, primarily through Google News Alerts, we were able to find 92 reports of black bear attacks on humans across North America – 49 instances involved dog(s) (53%), 20 of 32 in 2013 alone (63%). Because media accounts of events can be incomplete, it would be difficult to accurately identify how many dogs were on leash vs. off leash. What the data does suggest is that in the vast majority of cases, it seemed as though the dog(s) had been running loose at the time of the attack and drew the bear to their owners. It also appears that many of the bears weren't focused on the dogs, but came right after the owner. In the three fatal attacks reported during the same period, one involved an individual who had let their dog out for a walk.

Additionally, a myth continues to be perpetuated in the media – that female black bear with offspring will attack people to protect their cubs. Herrero (1985, 2002) and Herrero and Higgins (1999, 2003) reported that female black bear, even with offspring, seldom attack people although they can be provoked into attacking if harassed by people or dogs. Of the 92 total attacks mentioned above, 23 involved a female with offspring (25%) – 21 instances involved a dog(s). The data suggests that these defensive attacks could have been triggered by the presence of the dog(s) (91%) rather than the presence of a person unaccompanied by a dog (9%). Of the 66 recorded fatal black bear attacks between 1900 and 2013, only 3 (5%) involved a female with young (Herrero et al. 2011).

Competition often develops between species with niche overlap. Wolves, foxes, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, eagles and other bears have been known to kill black bear cubs (Rogers 1983, LeCount 1987). We suggest that bears react to dogs as if they were threatening competitors, sometimes attacking or killing them. In the 49 incidences involving a dog(s), dogs were injured half the time and in 7 incidents, the bear killed the dog.

Dogs can act as an early warning indicator of a bear's presence. We think it is important that wildlife agencies urge residents who live in areas occupied by black bears to restrain their dog(s) when walking through their communities or on trails. This should reduce the potential of harassing a black bear or of being attacked by one. Also, owners should check their yards for the presence of a bear before letting their dogs out, and dogs should be fed indoors as food left outside may attract bears.

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