

bear

WITNESS

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Our journey began at Winnipeg, Manitoba, near North America's longitudinal center. From there we headed northwest across the ancient bed of glacial Lake Agassiz and out through the rich farmlands of Canada's Red River Valley. Pancake-flat prairies morphed into rolling aspen woodlands as we approached the area around Lake Audy some five hours later.

Our host and guide on this expedition was Dr. Jim Irwin, a bear of a man with a background in wildlife biology and a doctorate in wildlife diseases. Jim and his wife, Candy, operate the 720-acre Riding Mountain Guest Ranch near Lake Audy. Candy is a former guest at the ranch and an educator with a passion for animals and nature.

It was black bears we came to see, and within minutes of dropping off our luggage at the ranch, we were among them. Our first glimpse was of three cubs high in an aspen tree at the edge of a large field.

Black bears are normally shy and wary of people. To enable visitors to

view the bears without disturbing them or habituating them to humans, Jim had converted an old school bus into a blind and blacked out three of its sides.

Jim maneuvered his van through the rutted field and slowly pulled alongside the bus. Cautiously and quietly, we transferred ourselves from the van to the bus and lowered its windows. The chilled air of late October poured into the blind and sent us digging in our backpacks for hats and gloves.

Within minutes the dark shapes of adult bears began to materialize in a shrubby clearing. All were females, or sows. The three cubs shimmied down the tree and joined the adults as they foraged among the leaves and stumps.

Suddenly, one of the sows emitted a warning grunt that sent the cubs scampering up another aspen close to the bus. As we strained our eyes against the gathering dusk, a cinnamon-colored female lumbered onto the scene and sat back on her haunches.

"That's Tripawed," Jim whispered, pronounced like "tripod." "She's only got three legs. She lost her right front one to a trapper's snare. When she tried to pull herself free, the snare tightened and shut off the circulation. The leg developed gangrene and had to come off. She's lucky to be alive."

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Black bears populate Riding Mountain National Park in southwestern Manitoba, which also has cinnamon bears (below), a subspecies of the black. A cub (bottom) scaled a tree in a hurry when its mother warned of approaching danger.

Photos by Beth Parks

Note: In Part I (*Bear With Me*, Jan. 17-18, 2009) I described our "tundra buggy" encounter with polar bears near Churchill, in northeastern Manitoba. Part II of our journey brought us up close to black bears near Riding Mountain National Park in the southwestern part of Manitoba.



Bears

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Jim went on to explain that, whether or not private land is posted, Manitoba law requires hunters and trappers to obtain permission for their activities from landowners or lawful occupants. Permission had not been granted to the individual who snared Tripawed.

The three-legged sow struck some great poses, although the light was fading so quickly that taking photographs was almost out of the question. We were not allowed to use flashes because they would alert the bears to our presence and also frighten them.

"Never mind," Jim assured the group. "The weather will be fine tomorrow evening. You'll be able to get all the photos you want when we come back."

The national park

Riding Mountain National Park features one of the largest black bear populations in North America. Because the bears are most active at dawn and dusk, we spent our days searching for other wildlife.

The 1,148-square-mile park sits on the highest part of the Manitoba Escarpment, some 1,500 feet above the prairie. It is the protected core area of the UNESCO Riding Mountain Biosphere Preserve.

The park consists of mixed forests and grasslands punctuated by pristine lakes, sparkling streams and secluded bogs. Some 60 species of mammals live here, including moose, wolf, deer and elk. More than 250 species of birds and about 10 species of reptiles and amphibians also thrive in the park's varied habitats.

A bison herd resides within the park boundaries. Bison are no longer in danger of extinction, having increased in numbers from fewer than a hundred in 1889 to more than 40,000 in Canada alone. Considering that only about 5 percent of Canada's original prairie habitat remains, the increase in bison population is remarkable.

Although we were always on the watch for wolves, lynx and cougars, they eluded us. Coyotes, however, thrilled us with their acumen in hunting rodents in the tawny fields and roadsides.

As for birds, the most impressive were the bright white tundra swans with their black faces and 5½-foot wingspans.

Animals aren't the park's only attractions. Folks with a bent for botany will find wildflowers and other vegetation not present anywhere else in the Canadian prairie regions.

In addition to all this, the park offers visitors a range of activities. It features 250 miles of trails and is a marvelous place for such pursuits as hiking, backpacking, cycling, cross-country skiing, fishing, horseback riding, boating and camping.

Back to the bears

As Jim promised on our first afternoon at the ranch, we had plenty of time to watch and photograph the black bears from the blind. Because bears are not predictable and the hibernation season was fast approaching, there was no guarantee that we would

BLACK BEARS AT A GLANCE

Black bears, *Ursus americanus*, live across North America from Alaska and Canada to Labrador and Newfoundland. They can be found throughout the United States and down into central Mexico.

They get their name from their jet-black fur. The name is a bit of a misnomer, though, as only black bears east of the Mississippi are predominantly black. In western and southern parts of their range, black bears vary in color. Their fur tends to be lighter and may be cinnamon, brown, reddish, cream or even blond. In certain Northwest coastal regions the fur sometimes even takes on a bluish tinge. **Black bears usually have a light muzzle and sometimes a white chest spot.**

Male black bears generally weigh 250 to 600 pounds and can stand as tall as 7 feet on their hind legs. Females are about a third smaller and average 90 to 400 pounds. The largest black bear on record was from Tennessee; it weighed 881 pounds.

Although the bears can walk on their hind legs, they usually do so only to get a better view or scent of something. They have an excellent sense of smell.

Black bears shuffle when they walk for two reasons. First, their hind legs are a bit longer than their front legs. Second, the legs on one side move together rather than alternating with the ones on the opposite side.

They have sharp, nonretractable curved claws for tearing, digging and climbing.

The claws enable the bears to scale trees easily.

The big beasts have been clocked running at more than 30 mph. They are also good swimmers.

Bears are opportunists and eat just about anything. Their typical food includes insects, berries, roots, grasses, acorns, bee larvae and honey, fish, birds and carrion. They sometimes take livestock. They are also attracted to garbage, which can pose a danger to humans if the animals lose their fear of people and associate them with food.

Black bears tend to be solitary. Home ranges typically are 8 to 60 square miles for males and 1 to 15 square miles for females.

Females, or sows generally begin to breed at about 3 or 4 years of age. When properly nourished they usually breed every other year. Males may be 4 or 5 years old before they win breeding rights.

Although breeding takes place in the summer months, the implantation of the fertilized egg is delayed. Embryos don't begin to develop until the female dens in the fall and enters hibernation. The whole process may take about 220 days, but actual embryo development takes only about 10 weeks.

First-time mothers usually give birth to only one cub. The average number is two or three. The largest documented litter is six cubs.

Newborn cubs weigh less than a pound and are blind and nearly hairless. They don't begin leaving their dens until the

spring thaw and their weight reaches 4 to 8 pounds.

Cubs are weaned in the summer and early fall of their first year and stay with their mother through the first winter.

Black bears are light hibernators and go into a state of dormancy or lethargy from which they can be aroused. Although they usually do not eat, drink or eliminate during this period, pregnant females give birth and nurse. Males and females without cubs will occasionally leave their dens during the winter months. In warmer climates the bears may not hibernate at all.

Although black bears can live up to about 30 years in the wild, most live only about 10 years. Deaths are primarily attributed to hunting, trapping, collisions with vehicles and other interactions with humans.

Poaching poses the greatest threat to black bears. Illegal kills supply mostly Asian markets with gallbladders, hearts and paws thought to have medicinal value.

Black bears are distinguished from the other species by their smaller shoulder humps, convex as opposed to concave profiles, and longer, less heavily furled ears.

Unlike grizzlies, black bears seldom attack humans unless threatened, wounded or cornered. Only 56 human deaths have been attributed to black bears in the last century.

If you encounter a black bear in the wild speak calmly, back away slowly and give it plenty of space.

see them at all. However, they did not disappoint us.

Jim scattered a bit of kibbled dog food to tempt the bears into the clearing. In a manner consistent with the Riding Mountain Biospheres Reserve resource-use practices in the "Area of Cooperation," he is careful not to habituate the bears or encourage a dependency that might interfere with normal roaming behavior.

First on the scene that afternoon was Tripawed, the three-legged cinnamon bear. Despite their reddish-brown coats, cinnamon bears are actually a subspecies of black bear.

Tripawed already had driven off her cubs and was likely pregnant again. However, we saw no other cinnamon bears in the area.

What we did see — and there were plenty of them — were black bears. The adults were all females, some with cubs.

The cubs romped and foraged, sometimes batting at a brazen red squirrel that seemed to take pleasure in stealing kibble from under their noses.

Quite often a mother bear would grunt, sending the cubs scampering up the nearest aspen trunk. The alarm usually signaled the arrival of an ill-tempered sow from the far side of the clearing. The sow had no cubs, and she tended to pick fights with the other adults.

The cubs waited patiently in the aspens until it seemed that danger had passed. Then they cautiously descended to the

ground, but any sudden noise or motion sent them scurrying back up the trees to safety.

As visitors, we were thrilled to be within feet of bears that seemed totally unaware of our presence. Numerous mothers and cubs came and went over the course of a couple of hours. At one time, nine bears foraged together in the same clearing.

If seeing and photographing black bears appeals to you, consider staying with Jim and Candy Irwin at their Riding Mountain Guest Ranch. You can visit www.ridingmountain.ca/ or e-mail them at bears@ridingmountain.ca.

You can also, as I did, merge the black bear and polar bear experi-

ences by booking a trip through Frontiers North in Winnipeg. Go to www.frontiersnorth.com and click on the Black & White Adventures link for information and prices. You can also speak with a planner toll free in North America by calling 800-663-9832.

The blinds at the ranch are unheated, and they can be downright cold in mid- to late October when the combined bear trips take place. The warm clothes you'll need for the polar bear expedition also will serve you well with the black bears.

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