

Bears

As those of you who came along to my talk at the Library and Community Hub last year will know, bears are definitely a favourite animal of mine. There is something about these wonderful creatures that I find irresistible; and a very good place to see them in the wild is British Columbia in western Canada.

The two types of bear that can be found in the region are black bears and grizzly bears. Confusingly, black bears can be black or brown, or indeed, white. White ones, known as spirit bears, are rare and are more likely to be found in the less accessible coastal regions. Grizzly bears are brown but can easily be recognised both by their size and shape.



Are bears dangerous? Well, yes they are, and they have been known to kill humans, but they are nowhere near as dangerous to humans as humans are to bears!! Black bears do their best to keep out of the way of humans and are unlikely to attack if you abide by certain simple rules; don't get between a mother and her cubs as she will definitely protect them, keep your distance and make enough noise to let them know you are around but are not

a danger to them. It's called using common sense. When off on the trails be aware of what is around you; grizzlies will stalk you!

Black bears can weigh up to 250 kilos and have a life span of 20 to 30 years. If one chases you, you had better be quick as they can manage 40-50 kilometres an hour! For an animal of that size it comes as a surprise that their main food is berries, of which they will need to eat about 30,000 a day. Therefore, their main preoccupation during the day is eating. It is only near humans that this diet changes as they raid bins, hampers, etc. Great strides have been made in recent years to make the bins bear-proof, which has also meant that fewer bears are making their way into town and so there is less conflict between humans and bears.

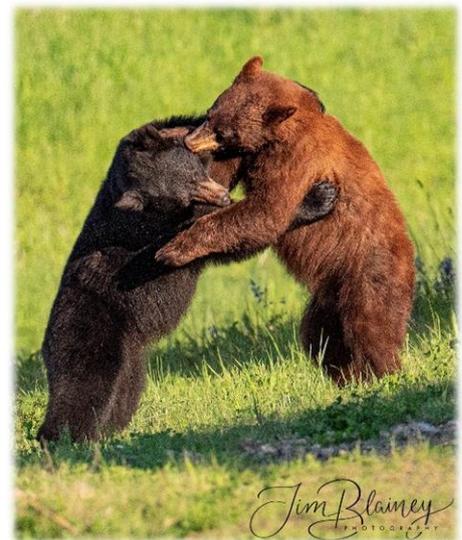




Last year, whilst staying in Whistler, which is about two hours north of Vancouver, we went high up on Blackcombe mountain with a guide, with the objective of seeing bears well away from tourists in an area where few people are allowed to go. A four-wheel drive vehicle was definitely needed and the track was, well, just that, very rough! The guide was very interesting and we learnt a lot about the bears' habitat and the other wildlife in the area. Did we see bears? We certainly did. What a wonderful experience observing them in their natural, peaceful world going about their business. As our guide had been going up there for 25 years the bears in the

area were used to seeing him and his vehicle and so we did not represent a danger. Part of my objective was, of course, to get some decent photos! The photos you can see with this article (in colour in our online version) were taken in this area.

We saw about a dozen bears but the magic was when two bears started play fighting, although it looked pretty rough to me! They were high above us but then they gradually started coming down the mountain towards us. They occasionally looked at us but continued eating berries. They came down to about 50/60 feet away, and we just stayed there watching them, absolutely enthralled.



So, if you like bears, British Columbia and the Rockies are great places to go. The area is very beautiful, there is lots of wildlife and the glacial lakes are stunningly beautiful. It is like going to heaven if, like me, you are a photographer. It is best to avoid August if you can as the Rockies between Jasper and Banff tend to get very busy at that time.

I will write more about the area and other wildlife to be found there in a future issue. In the meantime looking at the photos is bringing back happy memories.

Jim Blainey

