



SMOKEY DAVE DECALESTA – 12/14

CRITTER CORNER

Prior to the great land-clearing for agriculture in the 1700-1800s, New York was a heavily-wooded state. A number of now extinct “charismatic megafauna” (eastern elk, wood buffalo, woodland caribou, gray wolf, mountain lion, grizzly bear, and wolverine) roamed the state. All were eliminated in the 1800s by being market-hunted for their fur and flesh, indiscriminately killed because of their habit elimination of their prime habitat—extensive and heavily wooded landscapes. Only two escaped this fate, and that barely—the white-tailed deer and black bear. Like their other megafauna brethren, black bears and deer were nearly extirpated in New York by the late 1800s, and only the emergence of the then Fisheries, Game and Forest Commission (which evolved into the DEC in 1970) and concern by the hunting public resulted in protections that allowed bear and deer populations to recover.

As forestlands recovered in New York, providing essential habitat, black bears began their comeback in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks and in the wooded border between New York and Pennsylvania. By the early 2000s, bears had increased their range to include the Finger Lakes region and Keuka Lake—once rare bear sightings are now becoming more common as forests are replacing the vineyards that dominated the hillsides above Keuka Lake in the 1800s and 1900s.

The black bear is the smallest North American bear; large males approach 500 pounds and a large female would be just over 250 pounds. Territory (home range) occupied by males is in the 8-60 square mile range; for females it is only 1-15 square miles. They breed in July, and females give birth in January-February to 1-3 cubs during winter “hibernation.” Females raise their cubs over a 2-year period, breeding only every other year, kicking out the young ones at the beginning breeding season, which is a good thing because adult male bears are fond of eating cubs. They reach old age at about 20 years.

Females “hibernate” October-March, males November-February. It’s actually a pseudo-hibernation (biologists call it *denning*), because unlike true hibernators (e.g., woodchucks) bears reduce their heart rate from 40 to 8 beats a minute, as opposed to chipmunks which have about one a minute. Body temperature of denning bears also only slightly declines. The bears are faintly aware of their surroundings and if disturbed, or if sensing warm weather, they can awaken and move about. They den in large hollow trees, under brush piles, in culverts, and in cavities they excavate in the ground. Primary habitat is extensively forested areas, but they utilize openings next to forests (including cornfields and vineyards) for foraging, primarily at night.

Bears are classified as omnivores, meaning they will eat anything, animal or vegetable. They focus on grasses, fruits and berries, and insects, including wild honeybee hives (and hives of beekeepers!). To pack on the fat in fall needed to survive over-winter denning, bears gorge on acorns, beechnuts, and fall berries. They are notorious for raids on garbage cans (a recent study identified “plastic bag” as the number one food item in bears’ stomachs) and include barbeque grills as favorite dining sites. Wild bird feeders are also a source of fall food, and are one of the most frequent (nocturnal) encounters between bears and humans (take them in at night—the feeders, not the bears). Bears have learned to search forested openings in clearly-defined patterns, seeking out new-born deer fawns which are too slow (in the first week of life) to escape them.

There is a hunting season (September 6 - December 16 depending on hunting method) for bears in New York with an annual harvest in the low thousands. Bears belong in and contribute to ecosystems: among other things they are one of the few remaining predators helping control deer abundance. There are few cases where humans have been attacked by black bears, and the old axiom (never get between a momma bear and her cubs) applies. Enjoy their presence on the rare times you might see them

The New York Department of Environmental Conservation updated an informative pamphlet on black bear in 2007: read it by going to: http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/bbnathis.pdf.

If you’re interested in the history of charismatic megafauna and how they contributed to (note past tense) ecosystem health, read the book *Where the Wild Things Were: Life, Death, and Ecological Wreckage in a Land of Vanishing Predators* by William Stolzenburg.

