

Keep Your Eyes Peeled for Winter Bear Sign

by Phil Brown, Bird Conservation Director

March 2022



Bear sign isn't too hard to spot. photo © Phil Brown

It started with an early morning text from our neighbor, Deborah. A bear had “disabled” one of her backyard bird feeders during the night. Still in bed on this bright, but cold, Sunday morning, I groggily listened to my wife, Julie, recount Deborah’s message. As one who often employs odds and probabilities, especially when it comes to reported wildlife sightings (“if you hear hoofbeats think

horses, not zebras”), I brought my somewhat skeptical and un-cafeinated self into the conversation.

“Must have been a raccoon,” I mumbled. I had good reason to think the more common raccoon was the likely culprit, after all. January is the coldest month in the Monadnock Region, and while not quite subzero then, it hadn’t been particularly warm. But real winter had only recently come with the season’s first heavy snowfall blanketing the ground. When Deborah added that she observed the telltale evidence of a black bear – bent feeding pole and large tracks in the snow – I quickly shot out of bed.

On the Trail of a Black Bear

An hour later, Julie, my seven- and nine-year-old children, and I were on the trail, starting from the obvious place – Deborah’s feeders. The massive, pigeon-toed tracks left perfect impressions, showing heel and toe pads, and led us across our own driveway, along our rural paved road, atop stone walls, across a myriad of brooks in our back woods, and into a regenerating forest, replete with blowdowns, tip-ups, and other storm and weather-defeated trees which remained from a timber harvest conducted several years ago. The structure these trees now provide on the forest floor, combined with the dense regeneration of thorny blackberries and bushy white pine saplings suggested the perfect place for a denning bear. We were hot on the trail of a hibernating bear! Or so we thought.

“Our” bear was likely a male, a later hibernator than females – which, according to Mark Ellingwood, retired Wildlife Biologist for the State of NH, tend to go to den earlier and are typically accompanied by yearlings or birthing young during January. “If food, be it acorns or black oil sunflower seeds, is readily available, bears may stay active longer into the winter.”

Until recently, the lingering fall acorn crop had likely been easy enough to access. “There’s a metabolic paycheck for bears that take advantage of readily available natural and human-sourced foods,” Ellingwood notes.

Despite the size of a bear’s tracks, following a bear trail even in complete snow cover, we discovered, is not always an easy feat. The animal would occasionally backtrack on its own tracks, often detouring suddenly. At other times, it seemed to zig-zag through the brush, walking along downed trunks or precarious stone walls with ease, and then directly through the densest patches of head-high and prickly blackberry canes. We would tip-toe up to a tip-up, me in the lead at those moments in case we happened upon the snoozin’ bruin. “This might be the one,” I would whisper to my daughter. Though we never did find a true winter den, we came across two temporary “bear beds,” one which resembled a large bird nest on the ground in which sticks insulated the bear from the snow. For several consecutive days, I followed trail in search of where this wandering bear settled down, finding two more temporary dens, and eventually giving up after enough harrowing brook crossings and just ahead of a snowstorm which, ultimately, would obliterate fresh tracks (and likely shut down bear activity again). One thing became clear to me from my own wanderings: a bear goes wherever a bear wants to go.

More Winter Bears

So, why else are we seeing “winter bears” with more regularity? According to Meade Cadot, Naturalist Emeritus at the Harris Center for Conservation Education, climate change is driving bears to stay active longer. “While bears are not ‘true hibernators’ their winter rest is often intermittent and is better described as a ‘torpor’ or slowing down of their heart rate and reduction in body temperature.” And as Ellingwood notes, “With a known food source, bears will adapt their habits to meet their needs, as influenced by winter severity and food quality and abundance.” NH Fish & Game biologists have observed a shift of up to several weeks in the timing of bear denning. Last sightings are now often as late as early January, and they often become active again by March. In states to our south, bears den for shorter periods and can stay relatively active during the winter. We may be facing this future, ourselves, as winters moderate and as human-sourced foods become more readily available, particularly in southern New Hampshire.

More winter bears spell more bear encounters at bird feeders, which according to NH Fish & Game, should be put out between the ‘safe dates’ of December 1 and April 1. Bears will follow their keen sniffers to wherever there is an easy food source – such as bird feeders, refuse, backyard chickens, and beehives – something which ultimately threatens their own survival.

“We need to have a new conversation about responsibly feeding birds – and not bears,” says Cadot, “as the traditional dates are no longer sufficient to reduce bear encounters.” But not feeding birds altogether – even within this timeframe – is not a good option for so many of us who love this pastime.

We can live in better balance with bears, but this responsibility to adapt falls on us. Homeowners and farmers can keep bears wild by securing backyard chickens, beehives, and other livestock. Electric fencing around these is a good option, and some homeowners will even electrify their bird feeding stations, with great success, allowing them to enjoy feeding birds all summer, too! Simpler habits include taking feeders in at night, switching from seed-based suet to pure beef fat, and setting up a text chain with neighbors about bears in your area. We will then be on the path towards more responsible wildlife stewardship and can keep these magnificent creatures roaming wild as we all adapt to a changing climate. For more bear prevention tips, visit [New Hampshire Fish and Game's website](https://www.newhampshire.gov/fish-and-game). 🐾



This article was published in the *Monadnock Ledger-Transcript's* "Backyard Naturalist" column on March 3, 2022.