

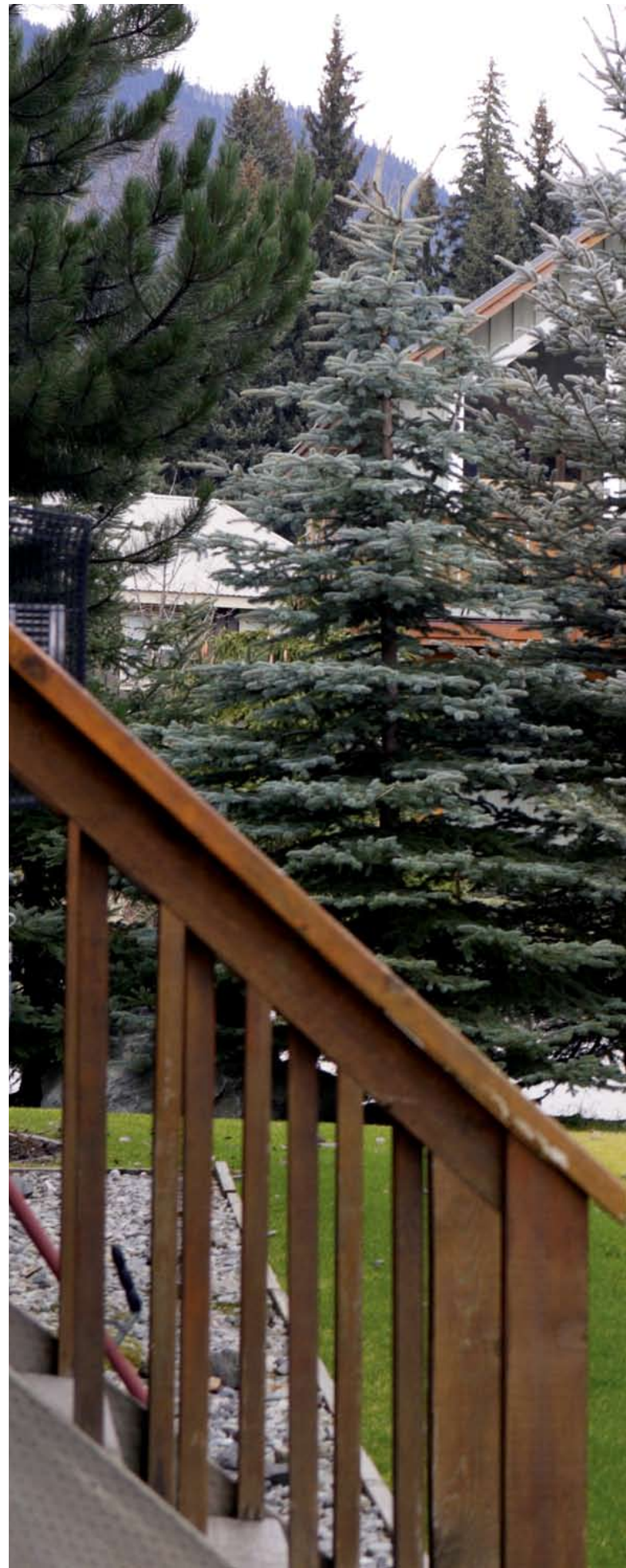
The Bears Among Us

Scientists in Whistler, British Columbia, have been trying to condition bears to stop romping through backyards and homes. But is there a way to really stop a bear without killing it? By Darcy Frey

No one can say for sure when things got out of hand — when relations between humans and black bears in the Canadian resort town of Whistler grew untenable for each side — but by the height of last summer’s tourist season, many of the bears that live around the densely developed, Swiss-style village in the mountains of British Columbia had apparently learned some new foraging techniques, and life for the humans took on an aspect of siege: Bears hitting the “bearproof” garbage bins along Highway 99; bears breaking into the loading bays and trash compactors behind the Hilton; bears discovering that snorting, jaw-snapping and bluff-charging golfers on the Whistler greens would cause those golfers to surrender their carts with their hands in the air.

Summer in Whistler is the enchanted season — gondolas gliding up the mountainside, bikers pedaling the paths, late-afternoon drinks at an outdoor cafe where views of the surrounding peaks, glimpsed from beneath the enclosing warmth of a palm-shaped heat-lamp, suggest that paradise must be made up of equal parts human and wild. In the 1960s, when the Garibaldi corporation carved this year-round resort out of the western Canadian wilderness, it set out to do things right — not so much by subjugating nature as by welcoming it to the party: green parks, cul-de-sacs and, from every winding lane and terraced ski chalet, views of the snowcapped, pine-covered

Photographs by Paul Nicklen





Borrow a Cup of Honey? A black bear feeling neighborly in Whistler.

Coast Mountains rising steeply from the valley floor. Beyond providing a setting of uncommon natural beauty, however, all this mingling of human-kind and the wilderness seems to have produced something almost taxonomically unique: Wild bears so habituated to the presence of people that the biologists who have come here to study them say they've never seen anything like it — bears that lift the door handles of trucks to take possession of the cabs; bears that manage to snag the bait from a trap with one foot while holding the steel gate open with the other; bears that stroll munificently through the crowds at the Canada Day parade; bears in the pubs, the hotels, the day-care centers, the landfills, meat lockers, grease vents, underground parking garages. In Whistler, if a bear doesn't get into something humans are guarding, it's usually because too many other bears got there first.

All across North America, the black bears are coming back, their populations thriving — and colliding — with humans as never before. This year, conflicts were as rampant as the bears, and the local news from the Catskills to California carried updates on the standoff: BEAR ATTACKS ON THE RISE IN NORTH AND SOUTH CAROLINA. ... BLACK BEARS GROWING NUISANCE IN WEST. But while images of slashing, 12-inch claws and saliva-soaked fangs stoke our most primordial fears, *Ursus americanus* — the normally wary, at times even docile black bear — still shows a striking reluctance to attack, even when defending its young. Of the estimated 900,000 black bears in North America, on average only one causes fatal injuries to a person each year. The danger of an encounter between humans and black bears is still borne almost entirely by the bear.

Since 1999, Whistler has tried to manage its conflicts without resort to what is euphemistically called “lethal management” — a uniformed conservation officer firing a shotgun into a thick-furred (and often retreating) flank. Most residents, aware that bears have caused only one reported injury in the town's history, are tolerant, even proud to live among them, especially *their* bears: Juniper, Beari, Oscar and the rest. Distraught that the province's Ministry of Environment destroys up to 1,000 black bears a year, the town has spent millions trying to lock up garbage and to teach citizens how to behave around bears using “bear-to-bear communication” — domination, body posture, direct eye contact. For three summers, there's even been a team of biologists in Whistler trying to teach bears how to behave around humans by using slingshots and marbles whenever bears stick their snouts in the trash. Nonetheless, Whistler bears remain so fearless in human society — by mid-November bears had tried to break into people's homes on about 90 occasions and succeeded on 50, and prompted more than 1,300 calls to the town's bear-conflict hotline (905-BEAR) — that so far this year conservation officers have destroyed 9 bears; another 6 or 7 have been hit by cars and died as a result.

For two centuries, as European immigrants moved west across North America, they sought to rid the landscape of any possible threat to themselves, their crops, their livestock; anything with big teeth — bears, wolves, cougars, bobcats — received a lethal round. In Whistler, which will host the Olympic Winter Games in 2010, residents are trying to reject that paradigm and move toward some kind of accommodation, and its management techniques have been used as far away as Yosemite and Durango, Colo. Even the most progressive mountain resort, however, functions as a kind of fortress in the wilderness, a zoo turned inside out: instead of taking nature to the people, it takes the people out to nature, where more than one animal has the impulse and wherewithal to run the show.

Whistler now has 9,000 permanent residents and draws another two million visitors annually to its ski slopes, biking trails and restaurant-filled pedestrian village; in midsummer, the traffic heading to and from Vancouver, 75 miles away, is so thick you can't turn onto Highway 99 without a 10-minute wait. According to recent estimates, the Whistler area also has some 100 black bears moving around the mountains and valley bottom. When I arrived last summer, 14 of those bears had been captured and collared, and every morning Lori Homstol, a 32-year-old biologist with the bear behav-

ioral study, would climb into a truck with an antenna on the roof and a radio receiver in the cab and go out looking for her collared bears. As she drove past condominiums and tennis courts, playgrounds and athletic fields, the receiver gave off a series of beeps — the louder the beep, the closer the bear — which led her to a manicured park with picnicking families, kids on the seasaw and a 180-pound bear known as Komor hiding behind a water fountain 50 feet away; or to a wooded ravine 10 miles north of town where Blue, an old and battle-scarred bear, had just been relocated in an attempt to keep him out of the grease vents and barbecue pits; or to the electrified gate of an ostentatious mansion, behind which lurked Alpine, a bit of a mansion himself at 400 pounds. “Most days it's a gong show,” Homstol said. “I just go bear to bear to bear.”

With the decline of unregulated hunting and trapping over the past century, the North American black bear population has soared, almost doubling since 1950; black bears now live in 41 states and nine Canadian provinces. Human populations, of course, are growing as well, and moving ever deeper into bear habitat through suburban sprawl and people's desire to live not only near but *in* the wilderness. At the turn of the last century, if people felt the call of the wild, they'd take the train perhaps to Banff, where they'd soak in a hot spring and never venture much beyond the front canopy of the Banff Springs Hotel. Now remote canyons and mountain meadows are thick with residential and recreational use. In Whistler, even the paint-ball games for kids take place on a field that happens to be in the middle of a flood plain. As soon as the air-horn starts the competition, bears come out of the nearby woods with their great, lumbering, hip-swaying strides to graze the paint balls with a bovine indifference to the gleeful splattered children running this way and that.

Even if a single human had never encroached upon this mountain valley, bears would still be here, drawn by all those stands of mountain ash, all those bushes full of blueberries. But when the bulldozers started clear-cutting the area for development, they not only removed foraging areas, travel corridors and denning space; inadvertently, they also drew bears toward human areas: all those cut-blocks for logging, power lines and ski runs are like permanently groomed avalanche slopes, promoting grass, clover and berry growth with all that sunshine. Moreover, Whistler's druidic devotion to trees means that bears, who like to travel in the forest and avoid crossing open spaces, can sneak into residential areas, and even within a few hundred feet of the pedestrian village, without being seen. When bears do come into the open — to break into a Dumpster or someone's garage — there's usually hiding cover or an escape tree just a quick dash away.

It's commonly thought that once bears associate humans with a tasty, high-energy meal — once they've learned that hitting a trash compactor or, for that matter, just two brimming bird feeders can deliver a day's worth of calories — they'll never go back to digging up carpenter ants. But as long as wild food is available, bears actually prefer it. When Lynn Rogers, a biologist who has worked with Minnesota black bears for 40 years, radio-tracked bears with easy access to human food, he still found bears working day and night for wild calla leaves a short distance away. Stephen Herrero, an environmental scientist at the University of Calgary and author of the definitive “Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance,” cites a similar study from Yellowstone showing that when white-bark pine nuts were plentiful, human-bear conflicts in the national park dropped right off.

When natural foods are scarce, however, either through habitat loss or natural fluctuations like the multiyear drought that has killed off pinyon pine across the west, bears get desperate and move toward human foods and garbage. In Whistler, the dominant males seem to take over what's left of the natural habitat in meadows and mountainsides; mothers with cubs, newly independent yearlings and other bears unable to fend for themselves head to town. “Black bears are ruled by fear and food, with fear at the top

What if every time a bear put its snout in the trash, you sneaked up, blew a whistle in its face and then pulled out a slingshot and hit it in the head with a marble?

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Who's Been . . .

Walking on my lawn? Bear sightings in Whistler.

of the list,” Rogers says. “They don’t want conflict. But they *will* overcome fear to eat.” Two years ago, in anticipation of the Olympics, Whistler closed its landfill and turned it into a transfer station. Right now it’s an open gravel area with lots of Dumpsters, garbage trucks and young bears trying to find a meal. One severely underweight cub, separated from his mother, dove into the back of a garbage truck recently and was inadvertently taken down the highway to Squamish; after startled sanitation workers discovered the skinny cub, they called in conservation officers to pluck him from the trash and send him off to rehab.

In conservation circles, it’s often considered a kind of philosophical success when animals find ways to live and move through landscapes altered and, in many cases, degraded by humanity — the ability of a caribou herd to negotiate the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, say, or a flock of migrating Canada geese to avoid the glass-paneled office towers in its path. But if animals can move through a landscape dominated by humans, they can also get themselves into trouble, particularly if terrain that looks like providential habitat turns out to be full of unseen peril — what conservation biologists call an ecological trap.

With all those bins, Dumpsters and garbage sheds around, downtown Whistler must have seemed like providential habitat to a three-year-old bear known as Juniper and her seven-month-old cub, Beari. Last July, the two bears entered an open window of a town house in the Whistler Cay Heights neighborhood while people were upstairs. By the time a conservation officer answered the residents’ call, both bears were back outside — the 10-pound cub, in fact, had fled up a tree. Nonetheless, the older bear had caused property damage before and, according to the officer’s thinking, the cub was also conditioned to associate humans with food and would likely grow up to be a “conflict bear.” Following protocol for bears that have broken and entered a home, or ones that could create the potential for human injury, the officer and an arriving policeman destroyed both bears.

Around Whistler, the shootings of Juniper and Beari opened whole new veins of anger and fear — some toward bears, more toward conservation officers with guns. “Is capital punishment — with no judge or jury — really the right answer for a bear that’s just trying to *eat*?” asked Sylvia Dolson, director of the Get Bear Smart Society, a local nonprofit that promotes nonlethal management and took out memorial ads for the dead bears. Running into Dave Jevons, the conservation officer who shot the bears, a resident called out angrily, “So you’re the guy who kills bears!” to which Jevons replied: “No, I pull the trigger. It’s the public that doesn’t dispose of its garbage properly that kills bears.” The point was taken up: at the sight of people illegally using Dumpsters and bus-shelter bins, residents started calling in complaints, taking down license plates, rooting through the trash to make an ID. And the officers had their defenders, even among those who work with the bears. “I’m on call with these guys all day, and I know they don’t enjoy shooting bears,” Homstol said. “Really, the only thing worse than killing a bear is explaining why you didn’t kill the bear that killed a 3-year-old child.”

Juniper and Beari had been dead for more than a month when I sat in on a meeting of the Whistler Bear Working Group, during which the attendees — high-ranking personnel from the resort municipality, the Whistler-Blackcomb corporation, the local waste-management contractor, the Vancouver Olympics committee, the Conservation Officer Service, the Get Bear Smart Society and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police — conferred for three hours in an atmosphere still fresh with soul searching and grief: What *was* the town’s “destruction protocol”? What if a bear *entered* a human dwelling but didn’t *break in*? Should officers consult the Working Group before killing any more bears? Was that removing “officer discretion” or simply offering a “perception check” that might help in the midst of stressful circumstances? The discussion turned to defense: Dumpsters, electric fences, garbage sheds, bins, the best resident-to-bearproof-structure ratio, doors, locks, hinges, pins or no pins. “Right now, we’ve got berries ripening to 1,000 meters,” reported Arthur De Jong, the environmental-resources manager at the ski resort. “If we get sun to the end of August, things look positive: A bumper crop of berries and less bear activity in the valley. But if the berries crash, we’ll have bears in our face through October.” In death, as in life, the bears kept bedeviling Whistler, testing the town’s resolve to handle them without resorting to slaughter. And as everyone noted, the season of highest conflict was the fall, when bears put on extra fat for their dens. If this year followed the pattern of previous years, the bulk of lethal management was yet to come.

“Here, take the left paw.”

“The left paw?”

“Yeah, grab hold of his ankle, and we’ll hoist him onto the truck.”

“We’re going to hoist this bear onto that truck?”

Homstol had been out practicing radio telemetry in her truck when a call came in from 905-BEAR: 200-pound subadult male in a Dumpster just behind the Husky Station off of Highway 99. When she arrived at the parking lot, Terry Myroniuk, crisply attired in a dark blue conservation officer’s uniform, had already loaded his shotgun with a tranquilizing dart and had a bead on the green metal Dumpster.

Homstol threw a rock at the Dumpster, which prompted a bear’s head and neck to rise like a periscope above the rim. In an instant, head was followed by body, and then a whole black bear was balanced gymnastically on top of the Dumpster. Nimbly, the bear jumped to the pavement, turned, ran and — *bang!* — took one of Myroniuk’s darts in the butt.

“Good shot!” yelled a small girl watching from behind a chain-link fence.

Dart hanging from its rear, the bear crashed through trees, splashed over a small creek and ran across a road just ahead of a bicycling family of four. Then, just as suddenly, he slowed and squatted in a grove of trees between the road and someone’s condominium. In a minute, the bear’s head began to sag and sway. Shortly thereafter, with the family of



Bear Catcher Left: A conservation officer responds to a bear call.
Right: A bear who was tranquilized, tagged and later returned to the wild.

cyclists gathering to watch, he collapsed in a heap of fur.

A tranquilized bear goes down for 45 minutes, give or take, which is not that many minutes if you have to drag the bear onto a truck, hog-tie it with rope and drive it to the municipal yard for measuring, collaring and securing in a trap before it comes awake with a grudge. In the grove now, the bear was on his back, snout up, eyes open. (A tranquilized bear has no blink reflex.) Myroniuk took hold of his right forepaw. Homstol did rear-guard duty, which left the last paw for me.

Trying not to consider those forward-facing eyes; the moist, dangling tongue; the curved yellow fang retracting the lip in a simulated snarl, I gripped the bear's paw. His fur was wet from his dash through the creek; his flesh was still hot from his failed effort to escape. "O.K., let's lift on the count of three," Myroniuk announced, and suddenly the bear shook his snout and let out a sharp snort, which sprayed us with saliva and caused me to jump nearly to Vancouver.

"Don't worry — that's just a reflex," Myroniuk explained, chuckling and waiting for me to step back in. "A bit, unnerving, eh?" Once again, I took hold of the paw, handling it with the same easy confidence I might have felt playing with plutonium. And then — "one, two, three!" — we hoisted all 200 pounds of him onto the truck. On the way to the municipal yard, Homstol decided to call him Murray. My hands smelled of Murray for a week.

Except for the intervention of tranquilizers, of course, an unarmed human cannot come face to face with a live wild bear without losing all advantage to the bear. For this simple but inarguable reason, Whistler has established a "no-go zone" in the pedestrian village where bears are automatically hazed with rubber bullets and flares. In certain cases, the town even translocates problem bears — traps them and drives them out to another mountain valley — although that rarely works, as a healthy adult bear usually finds its way back; a severely food-conditioned bear will simply break into homes in its new range; and an unhealthy bear, already stressed from being trapped and translocated, often can't survive the ordeal. Besides, as Whistler has discovered, though there may be a lot of bear mortality in town — bears being shot or run over by cars — the bear population only seems to increase. With so much available habitat, as soon as one bear dies or gets moved, another bear just comes along to take its place.

Running out of ways to keep the bears at bay, the B.C. Ministry of Environment called on Tony Hamilton, the province's large carnivore specialist; Colleen Cassidy St. Clair, a behavioral ecologist at the University of Alberta at Edmonton; and Homstol, one of St. Clair's graduate students, to see if they could actually manipulate the Whistler bears' behavior, teach these habituated and unwary animals what all this contact with people has apparently led them to forget: That humans are dangerous and should be run from at sight.

Bear managers and park wardens have tried aversive conditioning before: in Banff, for instance, they used to drive up to bears eating roadside vegetation

and blast them with water cannons. But as St. Clair points out, that kind of hazing not only violates several principles of animal learning theory (among them, that punishment should be immediate, consistent and not signaled in advance); all it ultimately teaches a bear is that, through a series of our bylaws, the only humans who will hurt it are humans in uniforms arriving in trucks between the hours of 9 and 5. According to St. Clair, hazing also ignores a breakthrough in animal psychology known as the Garcia Principle (after John Garcia's work with rats in the 1970s), which suggests that, no matter how hard you try, you may never be able to get an animal to associate food with pain. "It makes complete sense," St. Clair says. "In terms of its survival, a bear has had no evolutionary reason to associate food with danger."

But what if every time a bear put its face in the trash, you sneaked up, pulled out a slingshot and hit it in the head with a marble? What if you considered the flipside of the Garcia Principle, which suggests that animals can learn an association between pain and *sound* (which is why a bear looks up when a tree limb cracks), and five seconds before you whacked that bear with a marble, you blew a whistle in its face? Could you reach deep into its ancient evolutionary machinery and teach the bear that just the sound of a whistle was reason enough to high-tail it out of the trash?

That, at any rate, was the hypothesis, and starting in 2005 Homstol joined with two other young biologists, Nicola Brabyn and Mary von der Porten, to see if they could, as Homstol puts it, "restore normal wary bear behavior" among a group of chronically unwary bears, including a small, swift-footed yearling they took to calling Oscar when he showed up at the transfer station last June.

At 100 pounds, newly on his own, Oscar was having a hard time finding food and avoiding being pushed around by bigger bears. At the transfer station, though, he was getting in and out of Dumpsters with ease, and when Homstol, Brabyn and von der Porten took baseline measurements of his response to humans, Oscar's score was "indifferent." When they tried to measure his "displacement distance" — at what distance does a bear run and hide from an approaching human? — they came within 10 yards of Oscar, which is the least amount of space they will put between themselves and any bear, and Oscar didn't displace; he didn't even move. "We were wallpaper," Homstol says.

From the transfer station, Oscar moved into residential neighborhoods, often traveling with other young males. (When food is abundant, Whistler's bears abandon territoriality and become uncharacteristically social, sometimes even leaving their dens in winter to pick up extra calories.) Together Oscar and one of his companions lingered by condos, trying to remove screens from windows and break into garbage sheds. When a conservation officer darted the other bear to collar him, Oscar remained within steps of the officer, trying to engage his tranquilized companion in play. For five days, from dawn to dusk, Homstol, Brabyn and von der Porten followed Oscar everywhere, and every time they found him in circumstances they

deemed “inappropriate” or “conflict,” they pulled out their slingshots and fired at him with marbles. The five-day blitz had some effect: At the sight of an approaching human, Oscar began to move off, sometimes at a “lope,” sometimes even a “run”; and his displacement distance increased to 30 yards. “I felt like Dennis the Menace,” says Homstol, who has a way with a slingshot. “But the thing worked like a charm.”

Following the end of his five-day treatment, Oscar stayed out of trouble for about a week. But soon thereafter, with no more dawn-to-dusk hammering, he was again hanging out in yards and on porches, checking out houses and garages. Once, Homstol got a call regarding a familiar-sounding, small-bodied yearling who had broken into a truck, where he sat in the passenger seat as if waiting for a ride. By the time I was in town, some five weeks later, Homstol was coming to realize that, however effective aversive conditioning might be in the short term, it may simply require too much manpower and probably won’t work on bears that have already progressed down the food-conditioning pathway, especially in communities that can’t secure their waste. “We just can’t keep up,” she said. “Between the C.O.’s and us, there are only six people trying to teach all these bears.” As for Oscar, whatever wariness he learned from five days of marbles seemed to be slipping away without further upkeep, and Homstol concluded that if he stayed in Whistler he’d soon be breaking into houses and end up with a bullet in his chest. She and the town’s conservation officers decided to dart him, put him in a trap and — because he was young, healthy and not the *worst* offender they’d ever seen — give him a one-way ticket out of town. “Poor Oscar,” she said. “Maybe if we’d gotten to him sooner.”

For several days, Homstol and I went looking for the yearling in her truck. By then, he was a well-known and easily-recognized bear, and driving through town we followed not only his radio signal but also a trail of leads from residents who called in a small bear with collar meeting Oscar’s description. He seemed to be everywhere at once — at this barbecue pit, at that garbage shed — but whenever Homstol arrived at the scene, Oscar had given her the slip.

Then one afternoon, patrolling the Whistler Creekside neighborhood with Terry Myroniuk and Homstol’s Karelian bear dog, Sisko, Homstol looked up to see Oscar in the driveway of Cedarstone Estate, a Xanadu-size pile of old-growth timber and top-heavy eaves. At the sight of the truck, Oscar disappeared, then in a moment reappeared 200 feet up, ambling impudently and in silhouette along a ridge high above the mansion. From the driveway, Myroniuk had a good shot, but where would the dart go if he missed? Into what stream of human or vehicular traffic might a panicked Oscar run if he was hit?

While Myroniuk weighed his options, Oscar vanished over the ridge. Myroniuk jumped back in the truck, screeching out of the driveway in an attempt to cut the bear off at the next road. With Sisko barking and straining at the leash, Homstol gave chase on foot. She ran up the ridge, sprinting one minute past condos and tennis courts, leaping over (and sometimes under) decks and patios; the next she was scrambling through a thick exurban jungle of brush and climbing nearly vertically, hand over hand, up steep vegetated hillsides by gripping the leash and any low-hanging boughs. Sisko had the bear’s trail, though, straight through the neighborhood and right up to the front door of. . . . What was this? Le Gros French bistro?

Five in the afternoon, just before the dinner hour, Homstol stood, heaving for breath and holding the leash of her howling pooch. Through the open doorway came views of crisp white tablecloths and the aroma of duck à l’orange. A man in a chef’s apron appeared.

“*Bonjour*, my friends. How may I help you?”

“Trying to catch a bear,” Homstol said, still panting.

“Ah, ze leetle one?”

“You’ve seen him?”

“Ah, *oui*, he come in ze restaurant.”

“Inside? When?”

“Well, the other day I am finish my accounting and I am sitting down for a smoke when he come join me. He is very nice, he is a lovely leetle bear!”

Sisko must have picked up Oscar’s scent again, for the dog started whining and pulling at Homstol. “Sorry, gotta run!” she cried and followed after her dog, once again running an obstacle course of condo decks and tennis courts, boulders and tree stumps, all the while muttering that Oscar might be a lovely little bear today, but in two years, when he’s 300 pounds and charging the kitchen for foie gras, they’ll be demanding to have him shot.

Back through the woods we went in hot pursuit of Oscar — past houses and driveways, patios and woodpiles. And then I realized: same deck chairs, same piles of firewood; we’d been through here before. And suddenly it all came into view from above — a small black bear being chased by a dog and a biologist and a reporter for The New York Times Magazine — all four animals running in circles through a small human outpost in the British Columbia wilderness, God himself confounded as to who was conditioning whom.



month after Homstol chased Oscar through Whistler Creekside, conservation officers succeeded in tranquilizing the yearling and giving him a short-distance transfer to a valley six miles south of town.

One of Oscar’s companions was given a long-distance translocation to the Upper Squamish Valley, where he broke into an R.V. and was shot.

Komor was hit by a car on Highway 99 and had to be put down.

Blue broke into a home and was destroyed.

As of mid-November, Alpine and Murray were still alive and living in Whistler.

Each individual bear story can be given an ending, salutary or not, but if the story of our conflicts with the North American black bear seems nowhere near resolution, that may be because enough generations of bears have now become habituated to humans and our fragmented landscapes that, according to some biologists, we may have actually set the species on a new evolutionary path.

“This is speculation, of course, but in the last 50 years, there’s been intense selective pressure on behaviors that allow animals to tolerate and live in close proximity to humans,” St. Clair, the behavioral ecologist, says. “Certainly you see that with cougars, which are famously shy. But that is changing. Maybe bolder bears are selected for as well. It may not all be genetically based behaviors; it could also be learned or cultural transmission, and that spreads much faster than evolution.”

One afternoon, shortly before I was set to leave Whistler, I was out on the paint-ball field with Homstol while she worked out the kinks of a new experiment and, along the way, pointed out some time-honored black-bear behavior to me. When we inadvertently moved too close to one bear, it snorted and stomped, once, in our direction. “See, he was considering a bluff charge,” she explained. When we passed by another bear, it popped its jaws and huffed. “That’s classic. He’s saying: *Back off, you’re getting too close. If you keep coming, I’ll either run away or charge you.*”

A little later, we were in the woods above the field when we encountered a bear grazing along a path. It looked up at us and licked its mouth, a long strand of saliva dripping nearly to the ground. We were 20 feet away — in Homstol’s opinion, too close for comfort — so she whispered to turn and walk slowly toward the field. This we did, and when I looked back, the bear was 15 feet behind us, frozen in place. Once again, we walked toward the field, and when I turned again, the bear had closed the gap — it was 10 feet off, still making eye contact, still caught in that strange stop-motion pose. Like an image raised in a microscope, the bear kept getting closer and closer, though we never once saw it move. When I asked Homstol what *that* behavior meant, she said, walking swiftly toward her truck, “I have no idea, and I don’t want to stick around to find out.” ■

Trying not to consider the curved yellow fang, I picked up the tranquilized bear’s paw. Suddenly he let out a sharp snort, which sprayed us with saliva and caused me to jump nearly to Vancouver.