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Flook, D.R.

Black bear (Eurarctos spp.) in the
Central Mackenzie District. [Fort Smith?
1952].

6 p.

1. Black bear - Mackenzie District.
- I. Title.

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The Black Bear (Eurarctos spp) in the
Central MacKenzie District.

I. LIFE HISTORY:

Leopold (2) points out that the Black Bear has the lowest breeding potential of all the North American game animals. The low rate of reproduction of the Black Bear is explained largely by the fact that the females do not produce young until their third or possibly fourth year, and they then produce young only on alternate years. (Seton - 2)

Breeding characteristics of the Black Bear:

	<u>Authorities:</u>
Minimum breeding age - 3 or 4 years	Seton
Number of young to a litter - 1 to 4, 2 is common.	Seton
Breeding alternate years	Seton
Monogamous	Seton
Maximum longevity is 24 years	Seton
# Breeding season is mid to late June	Cahalane
Gestation period is 225 days	Skinner

According to Cahalane (1) bear cubs are very dependent upon the mother for protection from predators for a considerable period after emerging from the den in the Spring. At what age they are capable of fending for themselves is not definitely known. However, they do generally den with the dam during their first winter. She may allow them to suckle in some cases through the second summer. Generally the relationship between the yearlings and dam is broken off when she mates in the second June after their birth.

An instance of black bears breeding was observed by the writer in the Wood Buffalo Park - June 3rd, 1949.

9. Occurrence in Central Mackenzie District:

FORT RAE DISTRICT:

During September 1951, the writer explored by canoe and on foot a limited area west and north of Fort Rae making observations on wildlife in general. Observations on bear activity noted are summarized as follows:

September 8th - Walked three miles inland on the west side of Marion Lake and noted recent bear scats at three different places. A fairly well worn bear trail was followed along a creek bank and at one point, what was believed to be the beginning of a bear's winter den was found, freshly dug in the soil beneath the roots of a spruce.

September 10th and 11th - Travelled about 10 miles up the James River from its mouth and observed bear tracks at one point where we climbed the river bank, and where we walked a circuit of about two miles away from the river we observed several bear scats.

September 11th - Walked a circuit of about two miles inland from the north end of Marion Lake, and observed bear trails and scats to be very numerous, especially in cranberry bogs.

Bears are not readily observed from aircraft as they usually frequent dense cover, and when they are in the open they are difficult to recognize due to their similarity in appearance to a fire blackened tree stump. Aerial observations of bear are therefore not of great significance from a numerical standpoint. However, in the aerial beaver survey flown in the Lac La Martre region on October 7th, 1952, Mr. Kelsall observed one bear west of Lac La Martre.

FORT PROVIDENCE DISTRICT:

With the exception of the travelling by canoe done on the upper Kakisa River in connection with beaver live-trapping operations, the writer has done no work on the ground in the Fort Providence District. However, three observations of bears have been made from the air in this district.

In flying from Yellowknife towards Fort Providence on September 25th, 1951, (trip not completed due to fog) one black bear was observed north of Great Slave Lake.

In the aerial beaver survey of the Fort Providence District flown on October 3rd and 4th, 1951, one bear was observed on the bank of the Laferté River.

In flying from Hay River to the Upper Kakisa River on July 23rd, 1952, one black bear was observed on the delta of the Kakisa River on Tathlina Lake.

Warden Camsell reported observing fresh signs of one bear near the base camp of our beaver live-trapping operations on the Kakisa River.

Following the top of a beaver dam. I have not yet personally found evidence of a case of a bear taking a beaver.

Chief Warden Day informs me that reliable trappers in the Fort Resolution District reported to him that black bears kill some muskrats in that area. They capture the muskrat by lying in wait and ambushing it when it is portaging along a trail from one creek or pond to another.

Cahalane states that during the fawning period the black bear spends considerable time searching for young deer, elk or antelope. He states further that it has never been proven that an appreciable number of these young are taken by bears. It may be that the black bears hunt the young of the hoofed mammals of this region, i.e. Moose; Woodland Caribou; Mountain Sheep and Mountain Goats. However, as yet no instance of a kill of one of these species by bear has come to my attention.

(b) Game Animal

The fur of the black bear is used very little by the Indians of the Central District. Occasionally it is used as parka trim for which purpose it is rather inferior. The skins are only occasionally sold as souvenirs to whites visiting the district, and are used by some white trappers as rugs. They could be used by the Indians for this purpose but most of them prefer not to utilize the skins of bear for any purpose.

The pelage may be in fairly good condition immediately after the bear leaves the den in the Spring. However a short time after this the moult begins and this is not generally completed until September. From the time the moult is completed until the bear dens up for the winter, the pelt is in good condition and the quality continues to improve during this period.

The meat of the black bear is used as human food to a minor extent by the Indians of the Central District. The number of bears killed per season, as compared to moose or caribou is extremely small. No effort to hunt bears appears to be made and those killed are either encountered purely by chance when the Indians are travelling, or else they are bears which are causing damage to caches and which are sought after to be eliminated for this reason. The Indians of the Fort Norman District are extremely superstitious about bears. They feel that the bear has very strong "medicine" and many of them will make no attempt to kill a bear unless it is damaging their property, in which case if they do kill it they will likely use the meat as dog feed.

It is the writer's belief that bears could be utilized for human food more than is now the case in this district. This could be done if an effort were made to hunt them during the season in the outlying areas where at present they are not hunted at all.

A female bear which produces cubs during the winter has utilized most of the fat stored in her body by the time she emerges from the den with her cubs. The meat which a bear in this condition yields is of very inferior quality and it is not until late in the summer that she has recovered her fat supply to an extent to yield meat of good quality. Male bears, and females not producing young that season, emerge from the den in fairly good condition and even in the spring may yield fairly good meat. However, they improve in condition and consequently as a meat animal as the summer advances.

FORT LIARD DISTRICT

May 15th, to May 19th, 1952, I travelled from Fort Simpson to Fort Liard by scow on the Liard River in company with Warden MacNabb. On this trip one black bear was seen swimming across the Liard River about forty miles upstream from Fort Simpson. Bear tracks were observed on the beach at two points along the river where we stopped to camp.

FORT SIMPSON DISTRICT

Signs of black bear were very numerous in the vicinity of Brintnell Lake on the Upper South Nahanni River in August and September, 1952, when I accompanied Col. Harry Snyder's party on an expedition in that area. Black bears were seen by members of the party on five different occasions within a two mile radius of the camp, and these were four and possibly five different bears. Well worn trails and frequent scats and claw marks indicated the presence of appreciable population of bears, mostly of the black bear species, in the Brintnell Lake valley, and along the stream valleys emptying into Brintnell Lake.

In exploring part of the trapping area of J. Browning, seventy miles up the MacKenzie River from Fort Simpson, on the south side of the MacKenzie, on July 11th and 12th, 1952, I observed bear signs to be fairly frequent.

In exploring part of Joseph Norwegian's trapping area, thirty five miles up the MacKenzie River from Fort Simpson, on the north side of the MacKenzie, on July 15th, 1952, fresh signs of one bear was observed.

On June 14th, 1952, in travelling by truck from Fort Simpson to the airport, over a road some twelve miles long, tracks of probably two different black bears were observed, and one of the bears, a large adult, was seen on the road. The C.P.A. Agent who travels this road weekly reports to me that he has observed no more bear tracks this season.

On June 17th, 18th and 19th, 1952, I travelled from Fort Simpson to Wrigley by scow. On this trip we camped at three points along the right bank of the MacKenzie, and no bear tracks were observed in the vicinity of our campsites.

FORT NORMAN DISTRICT:

In a canoe trip from Fort Norman up the Bear River to the mouth of the Brackett River, and thence up the Brackett River to Brackett Lake and Kelly Lake - Bear tracks were observed frequently on the bank of the Brackett River and one black bear was observed on the river bank.

III. Economic importance:

The black bear fills two roles in the wildlife of the district - that of a predator, and that of a game animal.

(a) Predator

Several trappers - some quite reliable - have told me that black bears kill beaver. However, I have been unable to determine the extent to which this occurs. I have observed bear tracks in close proximity to beaver colonies and in one instance I found the fresh tracks of a bear

Y. Management

On the basis of observations throughout the Central MacKenzie District it is the belief of the writer that black bears are well distributed and in some areas may be locally abundant.

The species may play a part as a predator of some of our important fur and game animals. To what extent it preys upon these animals cannot be determined on the basis of the limited information.

The bear is of minor importance as a food animal in the Central MacKenzie District although I understand it is somewhat more important as a food animal in parts of the southern district. At present in the central district the bear is hunted only casually along travel routes, and killed as a nuisance around camps. I believe that if it were hunted over a larger area it could play a more important part as a food animal in the economy of the Indian.

It is the opinion of the writer that the potential value of the black bear as a meat animal in the Central MacKenzie District can exceed the damage done by it as a predator, and probably its present value as a meat animal outweighs its destructiveness.

Certainly more information concerning the damage done by the black bear as a predator should be collected whenever opportunity avails in the course of other investigations.

As this species has a very low reproductive rate some control of hunting should be exercised if the species is to be maintained as a game animal. It might seem desirable to allow the killing of only males, and females not accompanied by young. However, it is doubtful if this would be a practical regulation as the female frequently has her cubs hidden from view and even a conscientious hunter might inadvertently kill a female which had young. It is possible that if such a control were exercised, an unbalanced sex ratio might result. Seton points out that the black bear is monogamous. An unbalanced sex ratio might therefore result in many females not being bred.

The present open season which extends from 1st of August until 31st of January allows bears to be taken at that period when the meat of all bears will be at its best, and even a nursing female will have recovered much of her body fat, and will be a fair meat animal. This season also allows the taking of bears when their pelts are at their best.

Whether a bear cub orphaned on or after the 1st of August, has any chance of survival cannot be definitely concluded on the basis of available information. However, the writer is of the opinion that in the light of the limited information available August 1st is the most suitable date to open the season on black bear.

Bears frequently raid cabins or caches in an attempt to obtain food and sometimes apparently for sheer destructiveness. It would seem that under these conditions an owner should be allowed to kill the bear doing the damage at any season of the year. I do not know whether this is permitted by law under the existing regulations, but if it is not, I should recommend that this be included in the Game Ordinance. With this exception I recommend that the existing regulations governing the taking of black bear in the North West Territories remain unchanged.

Donald R. Cook.

Mammalogist - Central Mackenzie District

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