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BLACK BEAR ENCOUNTERS: KONRAD BROOK BIODIVERSITY FIELD CAMP, LABRADOR

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The forested valley of Konrad Brook. Treeline and highland tundra are visible in the distance. Photo by Michael Burzynski

In the summer of 2008, Foray Newfoundland Labrador was invited by the Wildlife Division of the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Environment and Conservation to conduct a mycological inventory at a biodiversity field camp at the lake at Konrad Brook, southwest of Nain, Labrador. The beach campsite had previously been used by provincial fisheries biologists. They mentioned that there had been a problem bear there a year or two earlier, but they thought that it would no longer be a danger. On July 21st, four members of the team (Claudia Hanel—Provincial Botanist, Andrus Voitk—Chairman of Foray NL, Anne Marceau—

Foray NL, and Michael Burzynski—Parks Canada biologist) were flown by floatplane from Goose Bay to Konrad Lake, landing around 1:00 pm.

Before we had even left the plane, we spotted fresh bear tracks on the beach—left by a mid-sized sow and her cub. Once the floatplane was unloaded and had taken off, we had to move the camp equipment down the beach to a site that was large enough to accommodate our tents. While this was underway, I unlocked one of the gun cases, removed a 12-gauge shotgun provided by the Wildlife Division, and loaded it with two rubber bullets and two slugs. I

also strapped a pouch of bear bangers to my belt. After a couple of hours of work the campsite was partially set up, and the team decided to take a rest by strolling up the lakeshore towards the river. Unfortunately I did not take the shotgun. Claudia and Anne were ahead by about a hundred metres and rounded a turn beside a patch of alders and willows.

Anne had just been telling Claudia how this was exactly the kind of place that one was warned to avoid in Torngat Mountains National Park (northern Labrador) because black bears hide in shrubs to ambush caribou, when Claudia spotted a bear about 30 metres in front of them. Claudia shouted "Bear!" and the two turned, walking briskly back towards Andrus and me. We could see Anne and Claudia moving down the beach with the bear breaking into a run behind them. It approached to within about 20 metres of them as I opened the bear banger pouch, loaded a banger, and fired it over their heads. The explosion slowed the bear, and it ran into the bushes that lined the upper beach. Anne and Claudia continued to walk towards us. The bear started to run after them again, and a second banger sent it into the bushes once more, briefly. Anne and Claudia reached us, and as we moved backwards towards our camp I launched a third banger, at which point the bear merely strolled towards the bushes, then turned, and stood and watched us. Leaving the loaded bear banger, I ran back to the camp and got the shotgun.

Our dilemma was that the bear had acted aggressively, had quickly become habituated to bear bangers, and showed no fear of us. This was our first day at the camp, and we did not want the bear to leave without knowing that we could be dangerous to it. At this point, the bear was standing watching us from about 100 metres away. Andrus and I ran at the bear yelling and waving our arms, trying to scare it away. We approached to about 60 metres, and it calmly sat down and kept watching us. I could not take a shot without the possibility of hitting it in the face and injuring it, but it shifted slightly, exposing a flank, and I fired a rubber bullet

at it. The bear leapt into the bushes, and was gone. It was a mid-sized animal, and appeared to be in good condition. Its tracks did not show any abnormalities.

We set up the camp taking all of the normal bear precautions: food coolers were hung as high as we could from trees, about 7 metres off the ground; no food or scented products were stored in sleeping tents; the work tent and eating area were about 30 metres away from the cluster of sleeping tents; all food wastes and packaging were burned, and wash water was disposed of in a sand pit far down the beach. Because of the bear threat, the latrine had to be constructed closer to the camp and to the lake than we would have preferred, but the sandy soil provided good aeration for breakdown. No one was left alone at the camp, and the group travelled everywhere together with a loaded shotgun. A second loaded shotgun was always accessible at the camp, and everyone was trained in gun use and safety. At night, Andrus and I slept with flashlights and loaded shotguns ready in our tents.

On July 23rd we were joined by Finnish arctic-alpine mushroom specialist, Esteri Ohenoja. Since we were conducting a mycological and vascular plant survey, we had to hike into the surrounding dense forest, up the tree-lined rivers, and onto the hilltop tundra during the following week. It quickly became clear that it is not possible for one person to safely carry a loaded shotgun, constantly watch for bears, and conduct a bioinventory. To add to the difficulty we had to deal with an amazing density of blackflies (some of which were 5 mm long) and mosquitoes, and with weather that dropped from 30°C to 5°C part way through the week.

The second bear incident occurred twelve days later. At this point five members of a second camp had joined us (Isabelle Schmelzer, Joe Brazil, Jeff Goodyear, Jim Goudie and Meherzad Romer) and our departure from Konrad Lake had been delayed by dense low cloud.

Around 9:15 am on August 2, a large bear was seen

at the far northern end of the beach, near the site of the first incident (about 500 metres away from our camp). The bear ambled down the beach towards us, and several of our group started to photograph it from the northern edge of the camp. I went to take a look, but left the shotgun behind, feeling that people thought that I was overly anxious about the potential bear threat. However, I did take the bear bangers with me. As the bear got closer, the helicopter pilot started to worry that it might damage his machine, and I became very uncomfortable about the way that the bear was acting. I gave the bear bangers to Isabelle, then I ran back to get the shotgun. I returned just as the bear moved under the helicopter's tail and faced the group of eight onlookers from about 15 metres away.

Suddenly the bear charged. Unfortunately, there was a line of people between the bear and me. Isabelle fired the banger over the water, away from the helicopter. The explosion made the bear veer into the alders along the upper beach. Rustling through the bushes, the bear attempted to flank us (there was a well-worn bear trail there, I later discovered). I climbed up on a large driftwood log so that I could see the bear, and when it was at the end of the log, about 7 metres away, I fired a rubber bullet—hitting the bear just behind the shoulder. The bear immediately turned and raced away, and I fired a second rubber bullet after it (which was probably deflected by the bushes). The bear did not return before we left the next afternoon. I went into the alders and did not find any signs of blood where the bear was hit by the first shot, so despite the close range it probably did not break the bear's skin. Photographs of the incident (see front cover) show a stereotypical predatory approach: the bear's head was lowered, it moved directly towards its intended prey, kept its eyes fixed firmly on us, and charged when close enough.

This bear seemed intent on capturing prey. It may not have had any previous contact with humans, or it may have been chased off with bangers before and realized that they were not dangerous. It certainly showed no fear of us—just like the first bear.

Loud noises (shouting and bear bangers) were not deterrents to either animal. Even a group of eight people was not enough to dissuade the second bear from its charge. Labrador black bears have a very short summer in which to put on fat for the coming winter. They have also been described as more carnivorous than other black bear populations. I believe that we encountered two different animals, and their predatory approaches may be typical of black bears in isolated parts of Labrador.

We encountered bears on several other occasions during the bioinventory. We were collecting on the high barrens to the south of the end of Konrad Lake, and had moved from open tundra and a brook into a small valley filled with dwarf birch and alder. The cover was just over a metre tall, and Anne again mentioned that it was potential bear ambush habitat. As we broke out of the birches at the valley rim, we saw a mid-sized black bear running away from us. It may have been in the birches and bolted when it saw us, or it may have been moving towards us over the tundra and heard or smelled us before we saw it. Its rapid retreat was what we have come to expect in Atlantic Canada during black bear-human interactions. A fourth bear was spotted from the helicopter near a fly-in sample site on the north side of the valley, but it bolted when the helicopter flew over it. Eleven more black bears were seen during a one-hour helicopter trip to Nain.

The blackflies at Konrad Lake were horrendous—we wore bug jackets every day, almost all day. Climbing and bushwhacking in steaming bug jackets was bad. Then the weather turned and we had to wear raincoats over the bug jackets and build fires to stay warm. Low cloud shut down flights throughout coastal Labrador, delaying our escape for five days, and forcing us to wait hour by hour for weather reports. On top of that, we had the constant bear threat. When it was all over, we had spent 14 days at Konrad Lake, we had explored an extraordinarily beautiful area unknown to mycologists, and we had had unforgettable experiences. However, nobody was sad to leave.