

Understanding Nervous Black Bear Behavior

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Abstract

When black bears (*Ursus americanus*) get nervous, they look ferocious: bluff-charging; lunging, blowing, and slapping the ground; blowing and slapping trees; or blowing and chomping (also called jaw-popping).

These behaviors are often interpreted as aggressive, and many black bears are killed unnecessarily for exhibiting them.

In observing hundreds of occurrences of these behaviors while working closely with wild black bears—including habituated and food-conditioned individuals—the behaviors have invariably been defensive and harmless.

We know of no attacks, and we have come to understand these behaviors as nervous bluster. When we see any of them, we know there is no danger of attack under the existing circumstances.

We give such bears more space to let them calm down.

We have never had a black bear come after us and hurt us in 46 years of study that includes accompanying mating pairs or mothers with cubs for 17 of those years.

We found that bears exhibiting these behaviors are easily chased away.

Any slaps or nips we received occurred when we initiated the contact.

On the rare occasion when a black bear kills someone, its motivation is almost always predatory; and it does not preface the attack with bluster.

We present videos of black bears displaying these nervous behaviors and discuss contexts and nuances.

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