

Behavior of supplementally-fed black bears in Eagles Nest Township, Minnesota

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Question

Fed bears can be dead bears, but can food also lead bears OUT of trouble?

A dozen homeowners in a rural community of nearly 500 people have fed bears since 1961. What we documented changed our most firmly held beliefs about feeding, habituation, and food-conditioning.

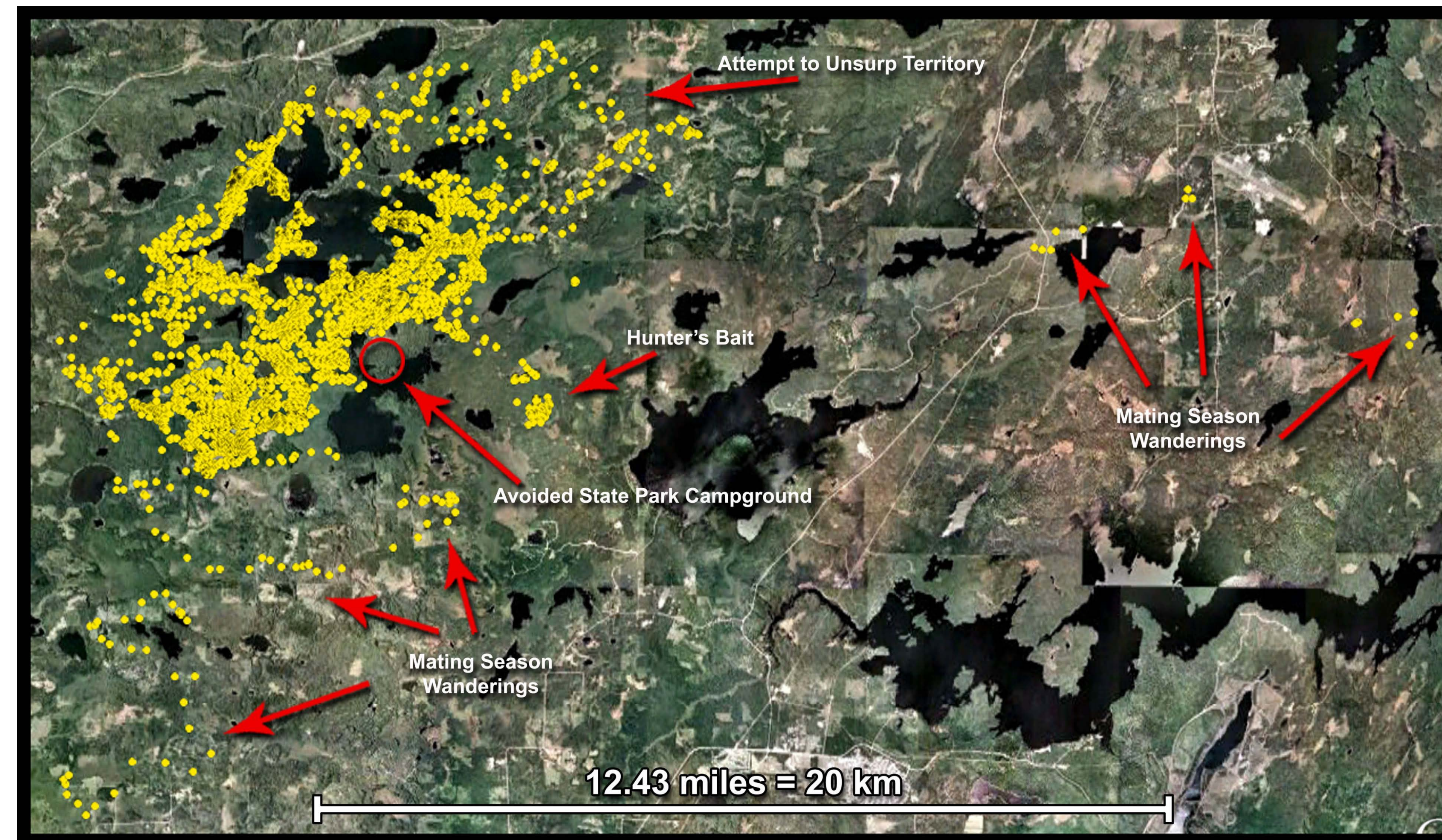
A decade of data showed the following:

What the people did

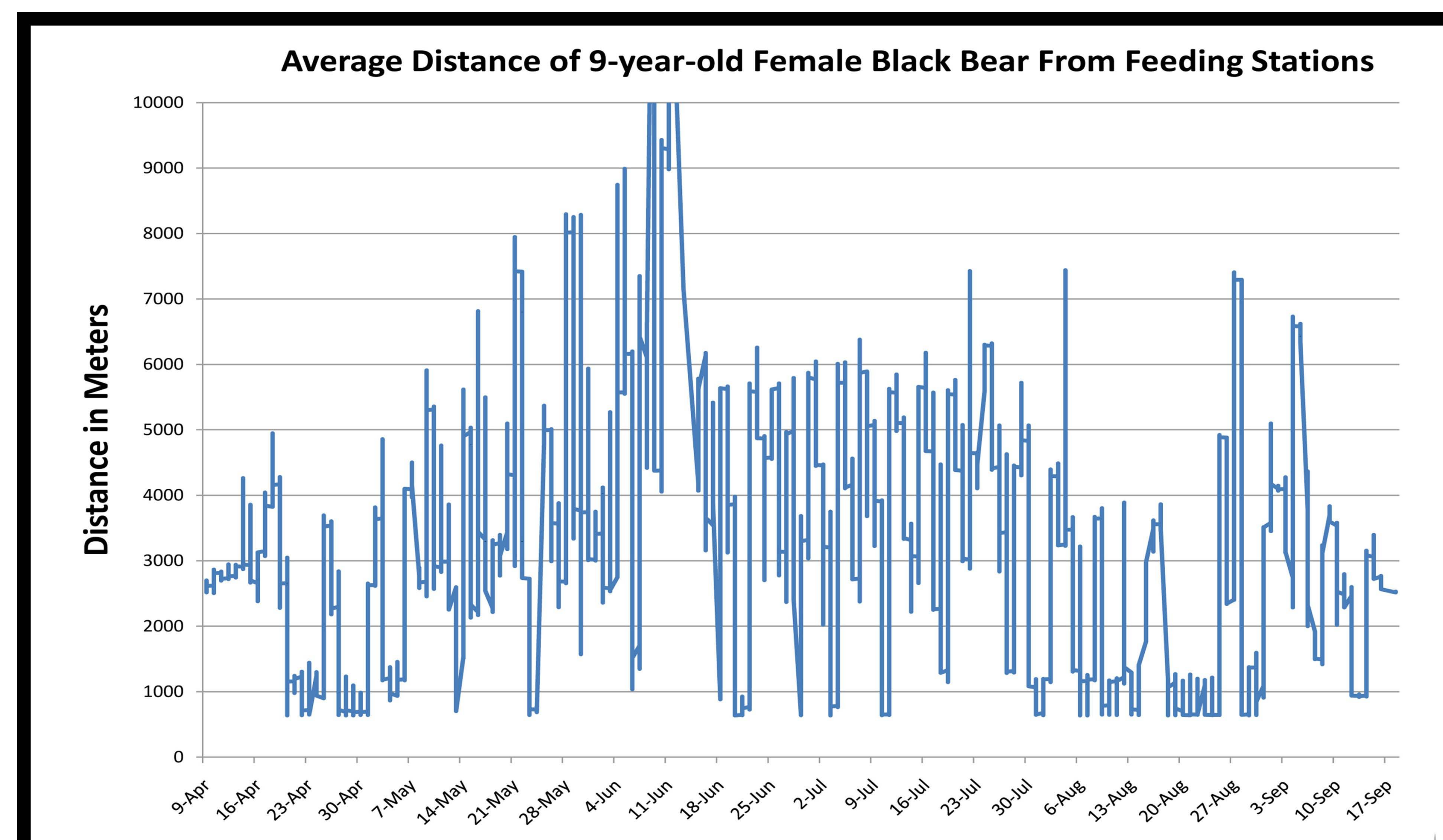
1. Residents were extraordinarily willing to coexist with the bears.
2. Residents filed only two complaints with the DNR—one for a bear at a bird feeder and one for a subadult looking in a window.
3. Residents hiked and picked berries without fear or problems.
4. Residents who reduced attractants were very effective in avoiding bear visits.
5. By feeding, people assured there were no bad food years and no desperately hungry bears.

What the bears did

1. The bears maintained normal territories and spent most of their time foraging for wild foods, defending territories, raising cubs, exploring, and avoiding people.
2. When bears visited feeding stations, they usually went directly to them and avoided other houses—even in the worst food years.
3. Bears that were accustomed to people at feeding stations avoided people out in the woods.
4. Subadult males dispersed as usual. A dispersing male monitored for 13 months avoided communities and residences while traveling over 396 km (246 miles).
5. Bears showed unusually high survival. Cub survival was 87%, and adults reached ages of 24 and 26 years of age.
6. Fed bears continued to prefer wild food.
7. Bears were healthy, grew, and reproduced successfully.



The territory and movements shown are from a 9-year-old female with access to 10 feeding stations. Yet, she pursued her wild agenda. She never entered the state park campground in her area. Above are her travels from when she left her den in the spring till she denned in the fall.



This 9-year-old female accessed supplemental foods prior to green-up and when wild foods waned in late summer (15% of days). Otherwise, she foraged entirely on wild foods (60% of days) and or foraged mainly on wild foods but began or ended her day with supplemental foods (25% of days).



What the bears did NOT do

1. Become lazy and dependent
2. Stop foraging naturally
3. Become increasingly aggressive
4. Attack people
5. Break into houses
6. Accost hikers or berry-pickers
7. Jeopardize public safety
8. Go house to house seeking food
9. Become attached to people and seek them out for company
10. Increase to unnatural numbers (resident bears maintained population levels typical of the region (one bear per 4 km)
11. Walk up to hunters
12. In 1985, when bear food was at a record low and nuisance complaints were at a record high, newspaper archives show that this township was singled out for having no bear problems due to the feeding program

Habituation and food-conditioning were specific to locations, situations, and individuals.

1. Locations—bears became comfortable with people at feeding stations but avoided people out in the woods and any locations where they didn't expect them.
2. Situations—bears became comfortable with routines but retreated from unusual situations.
3. Individuals—bears became comfortable with individual researchers with whom they developed trust and voice recognition. This enabled the researchers to join those bears in the woods for observation.

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