

When I first met Richard, on July 2, 1969, he was a husky 275-pound, nine-year-old, brawler. It was the peak of the mating season, and the scars and fresh wounds on the black bear's forequarters showed that his mere presence was not yet enough to bluff other males out of their amorous intentions.

Black bears have been my quarry for the past five years. Seasons and bag limits mean nothing to me. I'm proud to state that my bag is over two hundred bears. In spite of all this, I'm still on the best terms with the game wardens and their bosses here in northeastern Minnesota. You see, I'm a wildlife researcher. My weapon—a hypodermic needle mounted on a six-foot sapling. Most of the time I have the advantage of having the bruin secure in a foot snare before I approach him, in order to conduct a series of tests.

While black bears, like other wild animals, are not to be fooled with, they are a lot less pugnacious than some would have you believe. My research is designed to learn more about their habits and survival requirements, but in passing I have picked up a lot of interesting information about individual bears. Believe me, they are individual in character, and every time I have been in trouble with any of them it has been because that fact was ignored.

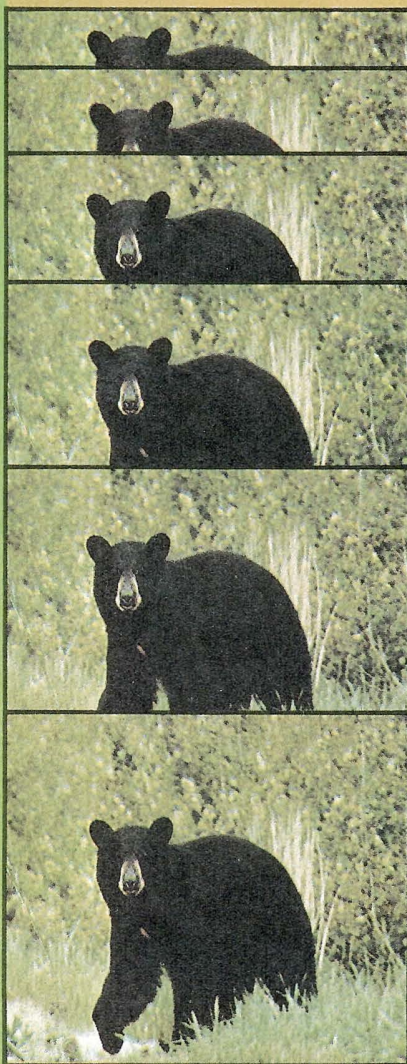
Richard is a bear that stood out among the 200 I worked on in northeastern Minnesota. I named him "Richard" because of his attitudinal resemblance to a good friend of mine. I met Richard on a trail leading into the Evergreen Dump. He was firmly fixed in a foot snare, an experience he remembered the rest of the summer. His big tracks, which could be recognized by a distinctive line in the print of the right forepaw, showed up periodically in the mud at the Evergreen Dump and at another dump a mile away. But after that, his tracks never appeared on the trail on which he had been captured.

Our acquaintance lapsed for nearly a year; there was no sign of him at either dump, and I began to wonder if he had been shot, as had so many garbage feeding bears in our area. Finally, in later August the mud around the Evergreen Dump was trampled with big tracks showing the dis-

TRAIL OF A BIG BLACK BEAR

Dr. Lynn Rogers

There may be a snare around Richard's foot (opposite page), but it never touched his dignity.



tinctive line. Foot snares set on the trail were ineffective, and it wasn't until snares were put in the garbage pit itself that Richard slipped into one. Last year's lesson of the futility of fighting the ever-tightening circle on his wrist had been well learned. So instead of making strenuous efforts to free his paw, he simply pulled the snare and the attached drag log to the edge of the forest, where I later found him lying in the shade with complete dignity and aplomb. He watched calmly but intently as I approached with a long pole, tipped with a hypodermic syringe. In contrast, other bears may make frantic efforts to escape, or cower in fear or, rarely, strain the steel cable in an effort to meet me half-way to get in their licks.

When the hypodermic needle pierced his skin, he jutted his upper lip forward in a sign of annoyance, audibly took in a deep breath, and explosively lunged forward snorting and slapping the ground with his free forepaw. I retreated in full scientific dignity. As a matter of fact, my record for the standing backward broad jump for Evergreen Township still stands. The cable held and I was spared further athletic events.

A half hour later, when the tranquilizer had Richard in a more cooperative state, I suspended a winch, a scale, and the bear from a sturdy branch and found that Richard now weighed 345 pounds, a light heavyweight in any league. I fitted Richard's 28-inch neck with a striped collar containing a small radio transmitter to trace his movements until he denned for the winter. He wasn't alone in his sartorial splendor, other bears in the area were wearing transmitters, also, each with a different frequency for individual identification.

For most of September, Richard stayed within a mile of either of the two dumps. He frequently ventured close to houses between the garbage pits, but his presence usually went undetected.

Once after rain had quieted the forest floor, I attempted to observe his activities in a stand of tall pines he frequented. His radio signal constantly revealed his position as I quietly approached to within 40 yards of him from his downwind side, but I neither saw nor heard him. His soft footpads and

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fur enabled him to move silently as he circled to the downwind side of me and then moved away.

Richard left the vicinity of the dumps in late September as he had the year before. For more than two weeks, I searched in vain for his signal along the logging roads of the area. Finally, in mid-October I chartered an airplane and pilot and pinpointed the signal in a small stand of aspen in a roadless area nine miles north of the dump.

The next day, guided by a compass and aerial photos, I walked to the general area and then homed in on Richard's radio signal. As I topped a rise, the strength of his signal suddenly indicated that he was close ahead. But I still couldn't see him, even though early frosts and recent winds had stripped the underbrush bare of leaves. The steady beep-beep-beep meant that Richard was not moving, and finally it was apparent that the signal was coming from a crevice in a rock outcrop.

Near the entrance, the ground was bare where he had raked leaves, grass, and moss inside for insulation. I listened and watched for signs of activity. Observing none, I moved to the entrance of the den and looked in. I heard a movement as my eyes were adjusting to the darkness and then I saw Richard, just three feet away, watching me. The position of his upper lip showed that he wasn't overly disturbed, and he blinked as if he had just awakened. There was the smell of hay from the den lining. There was no foul odor. Bears neither foul their nest nor do they have an inherent foul odor as do weasels and foxes.

A few days later I returned with four friends to help weigh and measure the bear and to see how he had fared for the season. He was in excellent condition, 60 pounds heavier than he had been two months earlier. He was now a real trophy and stood well to being an ursine tribal elder to be granted full deference in next season's mating wars.

Richard's radio signal was audible until early April of 1971, when the signal faded. I didn't see him again until early July, during the mating season, when I was flying to home in on a smaller mature male. Suddenly I saw the smaller male fleeing from a bear about twice its size wearing a striped collar. They disappeared into a stand of birch and then burst into a dense stand of alders where the jerking crowns revealed their path. Soon Richard reappeared and claimed a radioed female standing nearby who had been remarkably unimpressed by the hullabaloo.

Richard repeated his previous pattern and stayed away from the dumps and houses until later summer. Then in late August, I answered my telephone and heard an excited voice saying, "The biggest bear I ever saw just tipped over my garbage can! He's wearing a striped thing around his neck." Big Richard was back!

I set foot snares around the Evergreen Dump to capture him so that I could replace his non-functioning radio-collar. I also set several barrel traps. Each of these consisted of two 55-gallon drums welded together with a sliding door at one end. A trigger was rigged so the door would fall when a bear squeezed inside to get some meat scraps.

Richard had great fun with the barrel traps. He was too big to squeeze inside, so he simply batted the traps around until the meat fell out. He demolished two traps and left them as far as 75 feet from their original locations. Even though the area was saturated with foot snares and other bears were captured, Richard remained free until mid-September. When he finally did step into a snare, he again declined to fight it. Someone else discovered Richard before I did; and by the time I arrived, a noisy crowd had gathered. Richard maintained his "cool", with all the dignity of a visiting alderman at a political rally. He now weighed 455 pounds and probably was at his peak weight for the year.

By the second day of the bear hunting season, the news that the trophy bear was working the Evergreen Dump spread rapidly. But Richard had been through all this before and he retired to a more remote area. On September 24, wearing a new collar, he traveled nine miles north to a natural cavity under a big boulder about a mile from the den he had used the previous winter. This den showed signs of previous use and probably had been used many times since its formation by a glacier thousands of years before. For the next two weeks, Richard leisurely procured lining materials for the den and then began his long winter dormancy.

By the next spring, I had new radio-collars that would last more than a year. On March 25, two friends and I snowmobiled and snowshoed to Richard to fit him with one of the new collars. We

found that Richard was sleeping comfortably in his den under two feet of snow, except for an air hole eight inches in diameter. The temperatures were in the thirties and the forest was sunny, windless and so quiet that the thumping of his big heart became audible as he was aroused from his deep sleep, having been disturbed by my snow shoveling efforts.

I shone the flashlight on him, and he turned to face the light, taking in a deep breath. He expelled it slowly and audibly and then chomped his teeth in a warning, but his upper lip was protruding only slightly, showing that he was only mildly disturbed by our intrusion. He made no move toward the entrance of the den, even when the needle pricked his shoulder. All he wanted was to be left alone so that he could go back to sleep. The drugs took effect in about 20 minutes, and we replaced his collar. Richard had lost 125 pounds over winter; a weight loss scarcely noticeable because of his thick coat.

Richard left his den in mid-April after most of the snow had melted. He headed southward, moving leisurely, feeding on ants and young vegetation. By early May, he visited Evergreen Dump several times and then moved northwest about 10 miles where he claimed a moose carcass from some timber wolves. Wherever he went, he stopped periodically to rub on trees. With the mating season approaching, each mature male posed a threat to the others, and the information Richard left on trees helped other bears avoid unnecessary encounters with him.

In late May, he returned to the Evergreen Dump to find that an ear-tagged male about his same size but four years younger had taken over. Rather than challenge the big rival, Richard went to another dump which was being used by a somewhat smaller collared male. The smaller male suddenly decided to take a trip eight miles southwest.

Two days later, Richard approached the Evergreen Dump again. We watched from the airplane as he tested the wind approximately 100 yards downwind from the dump. Between him and the dump the rival male was busily rubbing and biting trees. Richard left and returned again in the evening only to find his rival in the

dump again. He might have challenged the big bear, but no female was present. The effort was not worth the chance, so he left for the other dump where he could eat in peace.

A few days later, in early June, he began roaming over an 80-square-mile area searching for receptive females. Usually when I located him from my plane, the vegetation was too thick to make him visible, but we did learn what kinds of habitat he was using. Several times I saw him in openings, rubbing on trees or traveling. On one occasion, I saw him at the base of a tree in which a sow and her cub had taken refuge. After that episode, he cooled off in a beaver pond for a few minutes.

In mid-June, he moved into an area where he had seen a big male accompanying a female, and there the signal stopped. After a few days, I walked to the place and found Richard's striped collar lying in the midst of a 25-foot diameter arena of flattened trees, ripped vegetation and ground littered with clumps of fur. There was no score board to show who had won, but the carnage clearly indicated that whoever claimed the sow had to be some bear.

I didn't see Richard after that. He didn't show up at the dumps in September, although a very big bear with ear tags and no collar was seen quite regularly around a small settlement six miles away. One of the residents told me, "I had my eye on that bear; but, you know, he quit coming around just two days before the season opened." Ø