

International Bear News

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Review of “Living With Bears: a practical guide to bear country”

by Linda Masterson. 2006. PixyJack Press, Masonville, Colorado. 255 pp.

Karen Noyce
Forest Wildlife Populations and
Research Group
1201 East Highway 2
Grand Rapids, MN 55744, USA
Tel: +1 218-327-4133
Email: karen.noyce@dnr.state.mn.us

These days, a person traveling across North America can, with little effort, amass an impressive collection of fact sheets, pamphlets, brochures, and posters all addressing the topic of how to safely live, travel, camp, and work in “bear country”. With human and American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) populations growing in most parts of the continent, “bear country” no longer means just the forests and park lands, but includes farmlands, suburbs, rural residential areas and resort towns full of tourists. Municipalities and counties, as well as state and federal agencies, now produce a myriad of publications on avoiding conflict with wild ursine residents. Though often good sources of information, these are usually narrowly focused and geared to local conditions; it is more difficult to locate broadly relevant references addressing the spectrum of bear-human issues.

Linda Masterson, an enthusiastic outdoorswoman, became involved in Colorado’s Bear Aware program soon after moving from Illinois to rural Colorado. That year, more bears than usual wandered into towns looking for food, getting themselves labeled as “nuisance” bears and subsequently removed from the population. Masterson hated seeing so many bears killed and set out to compile a complete user-friendly guide to living

peacefully, working, and vacationing where there are black bears in the neighborhood. The result, “Living with bears: a practical guide to bear country”, is a comprehensive primer on how to behave around bears and minimize the chances of coming too-close-for-comfort with bears, whether grilling in your back yard or hunting in the backcountry. Masterson has distilled information from countless publications and hours of interviews and produced a book that is easy to read, packed with information, and useful for professionals and the public alike. The text is light and readable and the message is clear: keep human foods away from bears; these are the reasons why and here are many ways to do it. At the same time, the enjoyment the author derives from stories illustrating bears’ intelligence, behavioral flexibility, and individuality is apparent throughout.

The book begins with sections on basic bear biology and behavior. I was pleased to see that Masterson sometimes looked further than “conventional wisdom” for her information, as in the section “Why Do Bears Roam?” Instead of the usual “Bears move most when foods are poor”, she conscientiously cites data from Colorado showing that, contrary to conventional wisdom, “...how far bears wander doesn’t always have much to do with how much food is available.”

Subsequent chapters focus on specific aspects of living with bears, such as bear-proofing your home, feeding birds, use of electric fences, bear-safe practices for camping, fishing, hunting, and hiking, and how to behave when you encounter a bear in the woods. Others cover the use of pepper spray, aversive conditioning techniques, translocation of bears, and how to distinguish black bears from grizzlies. Each chapter is packed with practical suggestions, illustrative examples, and entertaining stories from various locales, giving the book a broad appeal and usefulness. It was delightful to find ideas in the text that were new to me, a long-time bear bi-

ologist, such as the “Bear Unwelcome Mat” and how to design a kid-proof electric fence. The book’s appendices are a helpful resource, providing addresses of bear-aware organizations and government agencies, sources for bear deterrents, examples of community trash management ordinances, and recommended reading for anyone interested in bears.

I particularly appreciated Masterson’s decision to infuse the book with 14 case studies from parks, municipalities, and organizations across North America involved in public education and comprehensive bear awareness programs. Among the places profiled are Whistler, British Columbia, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Durango, Colorado, and Yosemite National Park. All are places with histories of chronically high numbers of bears foraging amidst humans. Each presents a different twist to management solutions. Some of the places I was familiar with, but not so with others and I am glad to now have convenient access to information on them all in a single handy volume.

My criticisms of the book are minor. Some of the recommendations, while regionally appropriate, are not practical everywhere. For example, where I’m from, even the most bear-savvy of canoe-trippers do not hang their food 100 yards downwind from camp, nor does the Forest Service feel it practical or necessary to suggest this in the thick forests and rocky, watery terrain of Minnesota’s border lakes country. Similarly, until there is actually a bear pawing at my windows, you won’t find me locking all the windows shut every time I leave my rural home for a few hours; the number of days we have to enjoy fresh air and summer breeze in the house are just too few. But some over-generalization is inevitable when coalescing so much

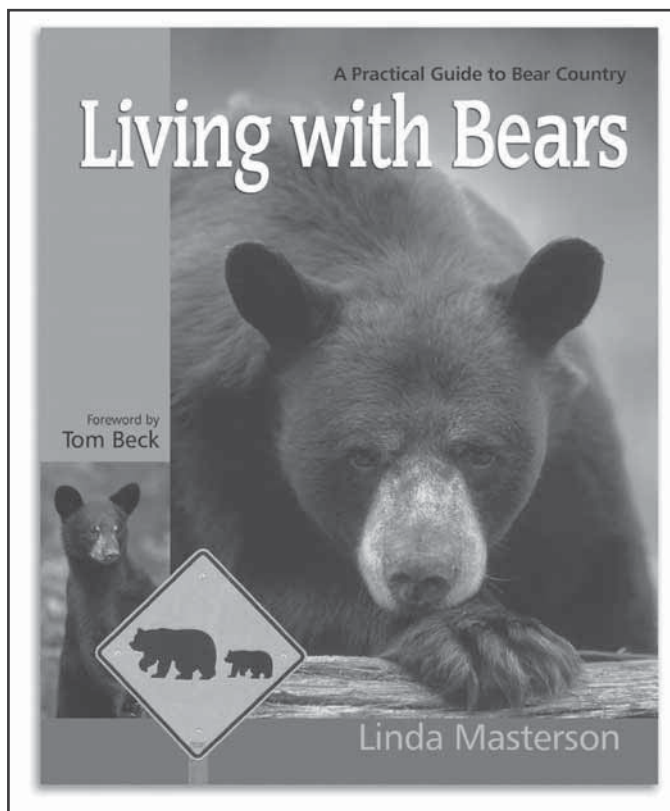
material into a single multi-audience volume, and Masterson always advises readers to check with local sources for specific recommendations. And, to be fair, when a bear does come knocking at my door, Masterson’s book will be the first place I turn to for ideas I might not have thought of.

Additionally, some people may find the text a bit repetitious, if reading the book cover-to-cover. This, though, is a necessary artifact of the book’s organization and intent; it is what allows chapters to stand alone as

the sanctuary, dozens of wild bears are fed every evening while spectators receive lessons in bear behavior on a raised viewing platform. Masterson recalls “I firmly believed ... there was no possible justification for committing the mortal sin of feeding bears.” But four days at the sanctuary “changed my heart, if not my mind. The opportunity to watch bears go about the business of being bears is an almost irresistible lure.” She could have saved herself likely criticism for this admission by omitting this case

study. But by including it, she reinforces the straightforward and thoughtful tone of the book and reminds us of the pervading conundrum that exists at the interface of bear and human societies. That is, that people love to watch bears, and it is through watching bears that many people first come to appreciate them. In most places, however, the opportunity to watch bears usually depends on providing them with food, intentional or not. But as bears become more “watchable”, some become too familiar, or sometimes even destructive or dangerous -- which, in the end, gets them killed. So, to protect them, we try to teach ourselves to resist the temptation of letting them become watchable, and this can be a difficult temptation to resist.

In sum, I found the book to be highly readable, clear, easy to use, and quite complete. I will be glad to have it on my shelf. Throughout the text, Masterson injects interesting anecdotes, facts, and quotes. Her style is informal and concise, and, if sometimes too popular for the hard core scientist, it is accessible and conversational for less stuffy readers. Masterson has struck a good balance between information and entertainment, producing a book that I suspect biologists, wildlife managers, and agency personnel will turn to more than they might at first think.



discreet, easy-to-read references on specific topics. With separate chapters addressing hiking, fishing, and camping, repetition of key elements is both inevitable and desirable.

Throughout the book, Masterson’s goal is clear: to minimize the number of bears needlessly destroyed each year. She is doctrinaire about “a fed bear is a dead bear”. However, she doesn’t shy away from sharing a dilemma with the reader. The subject of the book’s last case study, the Vince Shute Wildlife Sanctuary, is in stark contrast to other places profiled. At