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EXPLORING A MAINE BIOLOGIST'S LEGACY OF BEAR MANAGEMENT

By Nick Wesdock



Credit: Paul Cyr

Randy Cross weighs a bear cub in the spring of 2012 when the early thaw led to rare, snowless working conditions for him and his team.

Randy Cross grew up in a time when most people had no idea there were professions in wildlife. So, when his fourth grade teacher asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up, most students responded with “police officer” or “firefighter.” Cross, to the surprise and bewilderment of just about everyone in the room, declared he would be a wildlife biologist.

Years later, he received his Bachelor of Science degree in wildlife biology from the University of Maine and was offered his dream job as a bear trapper in Maine’s northern forests, some of the most bear-rich habitat in the country. It is a far cry from most dream jobs, however, comprised of 12-hour days that involve crawling through long, narrow tunnels or stumbling through waist-deep snow in subzero temperatures in search of bears — and, for Cross, it has lasted more than three decades.

When Bear Meets Man

Maine — home to about 1.3 million people — has a black bear (*Ursus americanus*) population of more than 30,000 individuals, according to the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW). Human-wildlife conflicts are inevitable, and Cross is part of a team that’s responsible for maintaining equilibrium among the two species.

Over the years, Cross has seen a shift in bear management that has become increasingly political. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, he says, noting that wildlife resources are publicly owned, but it does emphasize the need for education. “The people need to be educated in order to participate knowledgeably in a political arena about the topic of wildlife management,” he said, “And that’s part of our job.”

Last year, for example, Maine voted on a proposed referendum to ban baiting and hounding — the two most common and effective bear hunting methods in the state. It was the second proposal of its kind in the last 10 years. Cross, in an attempt to help people understand what the ban would mean for bear management, gave talks and presentations whenever he could. In addition to public speaking, which he still does from time to time, Cross gets over 1,000 requests for den visits each year from people across the country. He is able to accommodate only a small fraction of those people, but the MDIFW routinely broadcasts film footage to the public. Guests from the state legislature are among the select few who are brought along because it is important for lawmakers to understand the work bear biologists do, Cross says.

More traditionally, wildlife biologists are tasked with species management and research as the principle means of conflict control. One of the major ways the MDIFW does this is by ensuring the number of bears entering the population each year is similar to the number of bears being taken out by hunters. The Department’s objective annual harvest is between 3,500 and 4,500 bears per year, but since 2005, hunters have only been taking an average of 2,910.

Lower harvest rates mean more conflict, and Maine has already seen an increase in nuisance complaints. Yet, animal rights groups continue to vehemently oppose hunting methods such as baiting, which accounts for 79 percent of the state’s annual harvest. Further, four out of five states that have banned the use of hounds and bait in the past 20 years have seen increases in bear populations, nuisance complaints, or bears killed due to nuisance complaints, according to the [U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance](#).



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“We believe firmly, as the agency responsible for managing wildlife, that without baiting as a tool we wouldn’t be able to achieve our goals that are set for us by the public,” said Kendall Marden, a Regional Wildlife Biologist for the MDIFW. The Department is in the midst of creating a new, long-term wildlife management plan based on public input.

Leaving A Legacy

In March of 1983, three days before his 25th birthday, Cross encountered female bear #225 — known to some local biologists as Sara — for the first time. After driving several miles on snow machines, he and his colleagues trudged through six-foot-deep snow to visit the bear’s den, where it was hibernating with three cubs.

A few months later, Cross encountered the bear for a second time in what turned out to be a memorable — albeit somewhat unnerving — experience. Cross and other researchers had returned to the northwestern woodlands of Maine, known to locals as “the big woods,” to check on the mother and its offspring. After scaring the bear from its day bed, Cross found the three cubs nestled in a spruce tree and soon noticed #225 returning for its young. Cross hid nearby and waited, unsure if he should move, until the bear came within five feet of him.

“I saw the expression in her face change a little bit. I saw this recognition in her eyes that I was there,” Cross said, “and she very slowly and deliberately turned and then, like [a] shot out of a cannon, ran back down the beech ridge the way she had come.”

Of the 3,000 some-odd bears Maine has tracked since their extensive research began in 1975, #225 has been a standout — having produced six generations and 105 descendants to date. Cross says it is because of the unique human avoidance behavior the bear displayed on the ridge that day in 1983, which it has passed on through the generations. Although genetic advantages are diluted over time, behavioral advantages are not, and since

most bears in this region are killed by hunters, those that display weak human avoidance behavior typically don’t survive long. Baiting as a method of hunting naturally draws out bears with weak human avoidance behavior and removes those animals from the population, eventually altering the behavior of the entire population and effectively reducing human-bear conflict, according to Cross. “This bodes well for harmonious coexistence between bears and people because those bears that seek to avoid humans cause a lot less problems,” he said.

Ironically, #225 was harvested by a hunter a few years after its first encounter with Cross. In that area, hunting is the most common cause of death for bears that live past their first year. The MDIFW is tracking around 120 radio-collared bears at any given time, nearly all of them females, and Cross says it’s standard to lose about 14 percent of those to hunters each year.

At almost 16 years old, #225 had survived for a long time relative to the average lifespan in the heavily hunted population, though one of the bear’s descendants recently became the oldest bear on record to give birth in Maine at age 26, and at least one other descendent lived to almost 33.

Sharing His Wisdom

Over the course of his career, Cross has worked with over 100 individuals and mentored numerous others including Marden, who now works in the Department’s Sydney, Maine office. When they met in 1997, Cross agreed to take Marden — then a high school student — on a den visit. Looking back all these years later, he still remembers being astonished at Cross’ sheer volume of knowledge about wildlife.

“He was such a strong force in my life as far as giving me the opportunities I had to pursue a career, opening doors for me, and there’s no question he did that with



Courtesy of Randy Cross

A winter ice storm in Maine makes it challenging for researchers to check dens. Den entrances are often small and buried under several feet of snow.

countless other folks,” Marden said. “The impact that Randy’s had goes beyond bear management ... whether he intended to or not, he’s left an indelible mark on bear management but also on wildlife biologists in general in the state.”

Last fall, Cross was honored with the Maine Chapter of The Wildlife Society’s Award of Professional Achievement — just one more thing to add to his long list of accomplishments as his career in the field inevitably nears its final chapter. Field work for the 57-year-old is extremely demanding physically and there comes a time, he says, when you have to consider if you’re contributing more than you’re hindering the crew. He plans to continue the strenuous work as long as he can be useful, but has taken a step back in recent years. He no longer breaks trail or carries the heaviest pack. What he does, and will continue to do even after he’s done with field work, is help guide talented up-and-coming biologists.

“I would do it a lot longer if I was certain I wasn’t physically holding people back,” he said. “I do hope to be able to continue to train new workers; take advantage of all that I’ve learned over all the years along the way.” ■