

COLORADO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

June 5, 1996

Hugh Graham
Animal Alliance of Canada
221 Broadview Ave., Suite 101
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M4M 2G3

Dear Hugh,

During the late 1980's and early 1990's we made a concerted effort to accurately identify nursing female bears that were taken by hunters during the spring hunting season. We had only limited success. It is actually quite difficult to accurately assess nursing activity, even on a live bear. When examining pelts that were several days old it became more problematic. Not surprisingly, many hunters and outfitters claim just the opposite. However, bears produce relatively small quantities of milk and have little storage tissue; in marked contrast to the ungulates, which most hunters are familiar with. In 1992, our last spring bear season, we determined that 22 nursing female bears had been killed and reported through the mandatory check. However, none of these hunters reported shooting a female with cubs. This is from a total female bear sample of 61.

Another estimate of number of cubs orphaned can be derived from age composition of the female kill coupled with the breeding rate. For example, the proportion of adult females in the hunter kill is consistently near 55% in Colorado. Average interval between litters is 2.2 yrs. Therefore, of the 61 female bears killed in 1992, we would expect 34 to be adult. Divide this by 2.2 and we would expect to see 16 nursing females in the kill. Thus the estimate of 22 was at least reasonable. For large samples, I think this method will produce better results than having biologists/technicians trying to estimate lactation status.

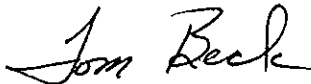
The question of cubs coming to bait is not easily answered. My experience, supported by others, is that most hunters mistake yearlings for cubs. They just expect yearlings to be much bigger than they actually are. The vast majority of pictures which I have examined of reported females with cubs turn out to be females with yearlings. Radio-tracking data indicate that nursing female bears often travel up to 2.0 miles from their cubs. They are especially reluctant to bring cubs into strange settings where they might encounter other bears, such as a bait site. However, that does not mean that they will never do so. Some female black bears do bring their cubs to bait sites with them. Most do so after several visits to the bait where nothing negative has happened to them. This is more likely to occur at a site not visited by a great many other bears.

Too many people insist on believing the myth that female bears always have their cubs at their side. This is just untrue. While we often try to generalize about bear behavior, it is important to remember that these animals are very much individuals. They also learn and remember experiences for many years. All of these factors will impact bait site visitation. Many hunters are excellent observers but many also infer much more from their observations than is warranted. Just as the presence of a solitary female at a bait does not mean she does not have cubs, the presence of a female with cubs does not mean she always brings them. Or that other females will either.

The issue of orphaning cubs in the spring season is contentious, and rightly so. The issue is not of how many cubs die, but that any should die because of inappropriately timed hunting seasons.

I recently received the "Bear Action Kit" and am appreciative of it. Also, in the material it was mentioned of a possible meeting on human-bear conflicts in Ontario in October. I would be interested in the date and location of said meeting as I may be in Northern Michigan in early October and might be able to attend.

Sincerely



Tom Beck
Wildlife Researcher
Colorado Division of Wildlife
23929 Co. Rd. U
Dolores, CO 81323