



## **Creature Feature: Fall 2013**

By W. Scott Douglas

### **Black Bear, *Ursus americanus***

It seems that this year, the watershed and surrounding communities have hosted an unusual number of our largest native predators – black bears. While a sighting of most large mammals prompts us to stop and gawk, this one comes with a bit of fear as well. There is perhaps a good reason for this, as there is no other animal in our area that has greater potential to cause us real harm, other than our fellow humans, of course. Thankfully, bear maulings are rare, much rarer than bear encounters. As with most wild animals, bears would rather stay out of sight of humans, mostly because *we* are *their* most significant predator.



The black bear, *Ursus americanus*, is the most common and most widely distributed bear in the world. Despite attempts to eradicate it along with all the other large predators, black bear populations are stable or rising across North America. Bears prefer densely vegetated, sparsely populated habitat, but they have adapted to periurban areas provided that there is cover and food. That food can be human food (or garbage), or suburban bird feeders, all of which we seem to provide in abundance. However, bears actually prefer vegetation, berries, and nuts such as acorns and other tree nuts, otherwise known as *mast*. They are opportunistic omnivores, and will eat almost anything they can catch or find, even carrion. If driven by hunger, they have even been known to take down a full grown moose!

Contrary to common thought, bears do not actually hibernate. They do sleep most of the colder winter days in a den, however, and they do not usually eat at all during this time. Their heart rate, respiration, and temperature do not change appreciably from normal. While breeding occurs in mid-summer, the 2-3 cubs are born during the winter. The mother nurses them while in the den, and when the bears emerge in spring, they are ready to begin learning how to forage. Cubs stay with their mother through the first winter and



Bears have been spotted in Springfield Township

disperse before the start of the breeding season. Males disperse widely, and often it is males that are seen wandering through suburban neighborhoods and summer camps as they look for new territories. They reach maturity in 3-5 years. Bears live up to 25 years in the wild, and can easily reach 400-600 pounds and 30-40 inches at the shoulder. Massive bruins weighing up to almost

1000 pounds have been recorded in our area, but these are unusual.

As is typical of opportunistic omnivores, bears are intelligent and have very good eyesight. In natural conditions they can puzzle out how to rout rodents out of their dens, rip open bee, ant, and termite nests, and find hidden nut caches left by squirrels. When presented the opportunity, they will use these skills to rifle through your camping gear, rip open your cooler, and even smash the windows of your car to get food. They may appear to be lumbering and slow, but they can run up to 30 mph if motivated. And they are great climbers. Given this, their size, and being highly protective of their young, it is not a good idea to go out in search of bears. Rather, it is better to have strategies to avoid them, and to keep them away from your house and your pets. Keep your garbage tightly closed, do not put meat or seafood in your compost, and bury game carcasses deeply. Put bird feeders high out of reach on small diameter branches. Suet feeders are tough, best to keep them at least 10 feet off the ground, and realize that they may walk anyway (I only fill mine in the winter). When camping, never store or even bring food into your tent. Store food, garbage and cooking equipment in a car, or use a bear bag to place everything at least 15 feet off the ground, and eight feet from the trunk or any substantial branch. Never approach a bear, regardless of what it is doing. Loud noises, such as banging on metal, or shouting, will often encourage a bear to simply leave.