

# Probable Black Bear, *Ursus americana*, Retrieval of an Elk, *Cervus elaphus*, Carcass from a Small Lake in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba

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Strong circumstantial evidence indicated that a sow Black Bear (*Ursus americana*) retrieved an Elk (*Cervus elaphus*) carcass from near the middle of a small lake to feed herself and three cubs.

Key Words: Black Bear, *Ursus americana*, Elk, *Cervus elaphus*, carcass, small lake, Riding Mountain National Park.

Accounts of observations of Black Bears (*Ursus americana*) retrieving carcasses from bodies of water are difficult to locate, even those based on circumstantial evidence. Studies of food habits of Black Bears by Hatler (1972) and Machutchon (1989) cite no such instances. Herein is provided a description of a series of observations that lead to the conclusion that an Elk (*Cervus elaphus*) carcass was brought to shore from mid-lake by a female Black Bear.

The observation reported was made at Grayling Lake (50°47"N, 100°W) in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba. This is a kettle lake (Lang 1974) and as such is deep (9 m) for its small surface of approximately 25 hectares. It is situated well below surrounding rolling hills in mixed forest about 9 km north of Clear Lake. With the exception of an 80-m gap to the NW and the lake outlet through sedge and grass meadows to the north, tall spruce (*Picea*) trees encircle and shelter Grayling Lake.

At 0815 on 2 August 2004 under full sunshine a large object was seen floating just west of the middle of the lake by the author and two companions from north-south orientated Highway 10 that passes just to the west of the lake (Figure 1).

Identification of the brown-gray object was not made even with 8 × 40 binoculars. At 12:15 that day the lake was re-visited. Though air movement was

Table 1. Wind direction and speed in km/hr in Riding Mountain National Park 2 August 2004\*

Time	At Wasagaming	At old Kippen's mill site
08:00	NW 6	SW 3.6
09:00	NW 4	NW 6.3
10:00	NW 9	NW 8.1
11:00	NW 7	WNW 7.8
12:00	NW 11	NW 8.6

\*Recorded by Environment Canada (personal communication, K. Kingdon, 2005)

almost negligible, the object had been moved close to the east shore, where two Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) fed on it. Some 50 m to the north, a Black Bear was hurriedly walking north away from the carcass and the Coyotes. It then disappeared into heavy coniferous forest. Shortly after, the Coyotes moved off and a bear appeared at a small partial clearing above the shore and the carcass. In subsequent days the bear, from this point, repeatedly chased off Coyotes but tolerated the intensive food collecting activity of a pair of Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*). On 3 August a sow led her three cubs to the carcass, where they fed.

In the next few days the remains of the carcass were identified as cow Elk (*Cervus elaphus*) by Ken Kingdon

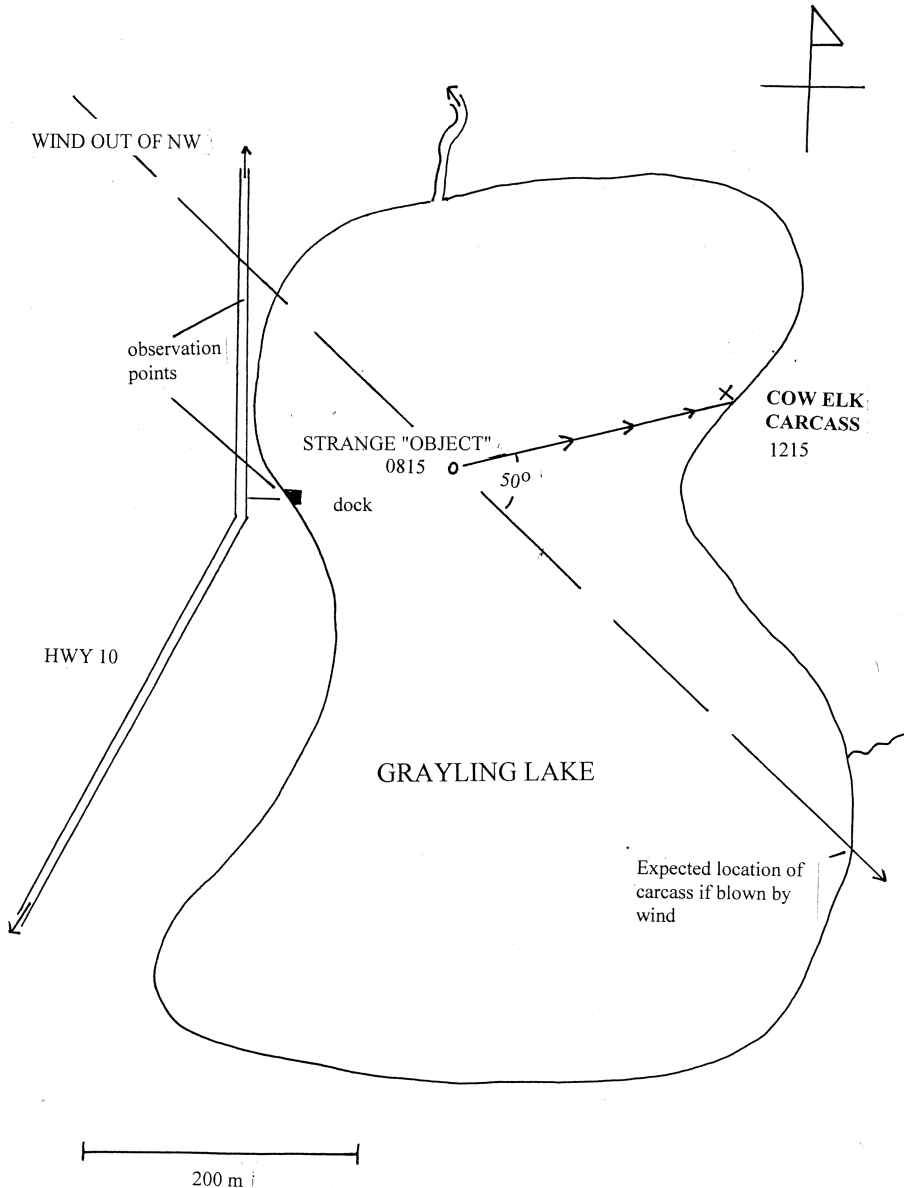


FIGURE 1. Elk carcass locations relative to wind direction, Grayling Lake, 2 August 2004.

of Parks Canada (personal communication) and independently by the author.

It was hypothesized that the bear had retrieved the carcass from the lake and had to swim out at least 200 m to get it. Veteran Parks Canada Warden Pat Rousseau (personal communication), an expert on Black Bears, concurred. In his experience he had not actually seen bears drag Elk carcasses ashore but, from an aircraft, had seen a Black Bear swimming halfway out toward an Elk carcass 40 m from the shore of a lake. On another occasion he had seen Black Bear and Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*) tracks associated with an Elk car-

cass on the shore of a remote lake in the park. In the mid-1990s a party of hikers reported an animal with a black head behind a carcass in deep water of Bead Lake Four less than 3 km NW of Grayling Lake. The only scavenger other than a bear that it might have been mistaken for would be the much rarer Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*) (Pat Rousseau, personal communication).

Environment Canada wind data in the critical time period that day (08:00–12:00) showed only very light breezes primarily from the NW which almost certainly eliminated the wind as being a factor in the carcass being blown to the east shore (Table 1) (Figure 1). On

a similarly calm day, 13 August, blocks of wood were placed in the middle of the lake to see if water currents would carry them to the east shore.

No definitive proof was obtained that the bear swam out and hauled the carcass a minimum of 200 m to shore. However, the negative results of the water currents experiment coupled with the data on wind direction and speed that day provided a strong suggestion that this is what happened. Still, it is possible that another species of scavenger (e.g., Wolverine) brought the carcass to shore, and then abandoned it. Further, although none was seen before 08:15 or after 12:15 there is a possibility that, while the carcass was unobserved by the author between these times that day, one or more people kayaking or canoeing on the lake took the carcass to the east shore. Interviews with such recreationists at the lake on subsequent days revealed no knowledge of the carcass being moved. Hence, both of these scenarios seem very unlikely.

In retrospect, the bloated condition of the carcass near the middle of Grayling Lake on 2 August doubtless produced a powerful olfactory stimulus for the bear and her cubs.

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