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Interviews with Bears

Trailside, near New York City

Margaret Redmond Whitehead



THE FIRST TIME I SAW A WILD BLACK BEAR, IN 2015, I WAS SO CLOSE TO Manhattan that I could glimpse its skyline in a dreamy pink haze. I was living in Brooklyn. That day I was out with two friends and my brother on a bite-sized section of the Appalachian Trail north of the city. We stomped along in a row—four bipedal, backpacked figures wending our way through a region of glacial rocks and bright green early summer ferns. We were somewhere near Pawling, one of those parts of the AT where the trail feels thin, just a buffered corridor linking together small state parks and skinny nature reserves, these bits of wilderness like cushioning on either side of a clandestine footpath. Suddenly, my brother said, “Bear right!”

We all stopped, expecting to turn right, assuming we had missed a white blaze. Instead we saw a black bear. I cannot accurately describe the magnificence of this animal. It was huge, larger than any other bear I had ever seen. It was larger than I could have imagined a bear to be. I couldn’t look away from its sheer mass and its thick, glossy fur. This bear had fur that touted its vitality: a luxuriously black, smooth, long coat. It must have been 30 feet away.

We stood still and stared at the bear, its nearness and its raw bulk. I remember my breath as soft, the air around us the perfect temperature, and that none of us spoke or moved.

It is possible to hike the entire AT and never see a bear. I had been hiking my whole life, mostly in the White Mountains and Shenandoah National Park, and had never seen one. It seemed incredible to me that the place I finally encountered a bear, so close that I could gawk at its coat and shape, was within easy reach of a behemoth human settlement. The AT crosses New York as if it is slipping past a sleeping dragon. It glides along the southeastern corner of the state, bringing hikers within 50 miles of Manhattan. Trains leave from Grand Central station to spit out city-dwellers at the AT stop along the Metro North, the ShortLine Coach carts busloads of people from the Port Authority to Bear Mountain, and New Jersey Transit runs rural public buses that crisscross the trail like piped icing.

And it’s more than mere distance: The human world permeates this ribbon of wild. Pausing on the trail to listen, I could hear leaves rustling to the ground, shimmying into place between twigs and dry papery foliage, the murmurs of a stream I crossed a hundred yards back, and the hissing wind

Pal, formerly known as Clarence, a 17-year-old cinnamon-phase black bear in his enclosure at the Trailside Museums & Zoo at Bear Mountain, New York, in May 2022.

MARGARET REDMOND WHITEHEAD

between the trees, but I could also hear something more familiar. I could hear the unbroken hum of engines on the highway.

Although spaces such as the AT take pains to delineate themselves as wild and separate from human habitat, they are rarely truly closed off. Sounds, views, access points, and animals—including humans—prove the porousness of such barriers. People enter bear spaces, and bears enter human spaces. I have to wonder, which space is whose? When I encountered a bear in a tiny strip of green, had I encountered the bear in its own territory? Or did it live its days in mine?

It felt like long minutes, but it must have just been seconds that the four of us looked on at the bear. We never got to see it standing still. We perceived one another at the same time, it seemed, and so as soon as we saw it, it slowly turned around, away from us, and began to lumber off. Again I was amazed by the thickness of its haunches, its hips and hind legs, and the loping kind of motion it made as it meandered away.

SOMETIMES THE TRAIL IN THIS AREA FEELS WHOLLY WILD. HILLS CLIMAX IN breathtaking views, small nubs of rocks poking their way out of the trees to let me stand, aloft, over quilted forests and hills in every direction. Silvery-green lichens colonize giant boulders, dwarfing any sense of human history. We tumbled down a set of stone steps and met the Dover Oak, its trunk more than twenty feet around, a force of a tree. It has a powerful and threatening air, branches like biceps and soft, worn-down bark that flakes away at the touch. Its base is whorled like giant thick rope. Its limbs stretch upward. It looks like it is contemplating ripping open the sky.

At other times, the protective nature corridor insulating the trail cannot fool its visitors that the trail itself is an alien, snaking through the state of New York, trying to duck past the skyscrapers unnoticed. Reminders riddle this path of its proximity to an 8.8 million-person metropolis. The year I passed through, there was such a glut of free food and water set out on this stint that some hikers complained that the goods were starting to lose their serendipitous magic.

When we reached Bear Mountain, a tourist hot spot with a parking lot designed for buses, the trail shifted jarringly into civilization. We came down a steep, wooded rocky slope to walk precariously along a highway, crossed the Hudson River on Bear Mountain Bridge, and got lost in the paved maze of a public area known as the Trailside Museums & Zoo. We lost our way again at a swimming pool and eventually emerged alongside a lake. As we trekked up along a paved section of trail, toward the inn, we were soon walking through the strong, warm smell of summer garbage.



The sheer mass and raw bulk of a wild black bear are magnificent. LISA BALLARD

Mostly, though, the paths we traversed in this area straddle the human and natural worlds. We passed old stone walls and abandoned stone settlements so sunken into the landscape that it took imagination to name what they might have once been. We strode through fields of tall grasses, and climbed stiles over electric fences. We pushed slowly through a herd of cows and past an old water tower from 1920. We passed a prison that had once housed New York State's electric chair. We sunbathed and swam at a lake, which is ostensibly cleaned up enough after a nuclear accident to have a public beach. In the old and abandoned scraps of human habitation along the trail, we saw that some element of nature had come to reclaim the land. Mines that once produced iron for the Revolutionary War were sunken in, filled with water, or both.

In a 2020 essay in *Orion*, Amitav Ghosh speculates that even though humans view "their ability to destroy trees" as the central fact that gives them agency over trees, trees—with longer life spans than humans and a much longer history of earthly existence—might operate "to a completely different time-scale." Perhaps they are waiting for humans to be wiped out, Ghosh suggests. Perhaps their agency is not like ours, in action, but in patience, and time.

I wonder if, in a reversal of environmental concern, these forests are silently biding their time before they invade and seize back our settled lands.

THE LOWEST POINT ON THE AT IS 124 MILES ABOVE SEA LEVEL, WITHIN THE Trailside Museums & Zoo. Specifically, I like to imagine, it is within the sunken and gated confines of the Trailside Museums & Zoo's exhibit on black bears.

According to Trailside lore, the museum and zoo was founded not as a zoo but as an educational nature trail, with the initial idea that one such educational trail would be situated at every major river crossing along the AT. The others, the story goes, were never built.

That day in 2015, we stood for some time with our packs on in front of the bear exhibit. It is a large cement crater with boulders around the edges, filled with a few rocks and a lean-to, some large balls, and a circular pool—some natural habitat objects, some not. Black vultures are everywhere within the enclosure. Also inside are two mature cinnamon-phase black bears. I only saw one when I came through, and I thought it looked vulnerable in the open, rocky space. It seemed lean, its fur patchy and scraggly. I couldn't look at it without getting flickers of the bear I'd seen just three days before, that great animal whose thick, black coat I'd itched to reach out and touch, whose muscles I could see ripple beneath its fur. I recalled that bear and how slowly, how indifferently, it had turned away from us and sloped off back into the woods. Here, now, was the inverse of our previous bear encounter. Here was a captive bear in a definitively human space.

The bears at the Trailside Museums & Zoo are siblings who were illegally raised as cubs in South Dakota, then confiscated. They arrived at Trailside in 2005 when they were just seven months old, each weighing as much as a hiker's backpack, and so acclimated to humans that their only chance at survival was in captivity. They have never really known the wild. They were called Clarence and Josephine—Fee for short. (Later, after a zoo naming contest, the bears were called Pal and Sadie.) Clarence, the bear I saw in 2015, has arthritis and Andean bear alopecia, an autoimmune condition specific to captive Andean bears that can cause a bear to become fully bald.

In some ways, these bears are not so *bearish*, not so *wild*. Zookeepers prepare the bears' food and monitor their body condition and mobility. They sit up and stand for food. On special occasions, the zoo dresses up their enclosure with treats so visitors can watch them at work: slashing open wrapped boxes on Christmas and nuzzling spooky decorations on Halloween. Videos of these events show the bears lumbering lazily through paper décor to sniff out peanut butter. In one video, a child's delighted cackle cracks off-camera. In the fall, zookeepers scoop up falling acorns and drop them into the bears' cage. When I returned to visit them in May 2022, I was permitted to

hand-feed the bears; their dexterous tongues plucked carrots and marshmallows from my fingertips.

Melissa Gillmer, the head zookeeper at Trailside and someone who has known the bears since they arrived as cubs, told me that, sometimes, wild bears will wander into the zoo. Clarence and Fee are often the first to notice. They begin sniffing the air and hanging around the fence. They are territorial over their enclosure.

One Mother's Day, a young male bear, big for his age, made his way into the zoo. He took great interest in Fee and Clarence and got past the fences through a gap under one of the gates. In this way, the young bear was able to come so close to the zoo bears that they were only separated by bars. The zoo staff tried to shout him off, but they couldn't deter him—the bear was curious and persistent. He refused to leave, sticking his nose through the bars, until Fee took one of her great paws and swatted him, hard. Then he took off, back into the wild.

When a wild bear wanders into the zoo, something interesting happens: Human zoo visitors stop treating it like a wild bear. Staff scramble, doing their best to shout the wild bear off and get it back out of the zoo where it came from. They alert visitors that there is a wild bear in the museum, perhaps wandering the same paths that visitors might be walking down, perhaps unseen, behind the rocks and trees. Once, the zookeepers' shouting-off tactics accidentally caused a bear to climb up a tree. Sensing that it would be up there a while, they decided to keep the zoo open and station someone beneath the tree to warn passersby. But the zoo visitors didn't seem to mind that there was a bear in a tree. They walked right past it. They came up to the tree and stood beneath it, looking up at the bear. People stopped taking any caution, as though they didn't perceive the bear as wild—that is, something out of their control.

Bears are among animals that we tend to see as “charismatic,” a term describing animals that compel humans to connect with them and sympathize with their plights. They have human-like qualities, sitting upright like humans, standing and walking like humans, and spending longer with their young—sixteen to eighteen months—than most other animals. We see ourselves in bears. Clarence and Fee are the most popular animals in the zoo; even though bears can be “nuisance” animals in some of their interactions with human environments, they still garner respect and awe.

But even as we know, most of the time, to respect their strength and size, there are places where our existences still precariously overlap. The western Hudson Highlands of New York State, which includes Harriman State Park and Bear Mountain State Park, and therein a large chunk of the AT in New



Sadie, formerly called Josephine or Fee, a cinnamon-phase black bear, came to the Trailside Museums & Zoo in 2005. MARGARET REDMOND WHITEHEAD

York, and its surrounds, is a landscape that faces tremendous public pressure. Along with the Trailside Museums & Zoo, and Bear Mountain with its tour bus-sized parking lot, is a beach with a more than 9,000-person capacity and 32 summer camps clustered around lake complexes. These hubs of human activity create bear attractants, such as wafts of barbecue and the garbage I smelled coming through Bear Mountain.

For a long time, there was not such a visible bear presence in this region. In 1898, in *A Study of the Vertebrate Fauna of the Hudson Highlands*, naturalist Edgar Mearns listed black bears under “Recently Extirpated Mammals” between the Canada beaver and northern fox squirrel. “The Bear disappeared from the Highlands many years ago,” Mearns wrote, “though my father’s mother saw them there.” Until recently, only young male bears would occasionally roam through, wandering after leaving their mothers. But over the past twenty years, as I learned from museum and zoo director Dr. Edwin McGowan, a population of female bears arrived and decided to stay. In 2013, a study by amateur observer Jim Conlon put the black bear population in Harriman at fifteen bears. Conlon estimates that today there might be more than 100 bears in the park. McGowan believes that the bear population now is at saturation.

In response to the influx of black bears, the parks have been installing cables at shelters, adding requirements for food storage at campgrounds, and shelling out money for bear-resistant dumpsters throughout the park.

McGowan recently hired three new people as a frontline wildlife response team to support the short-staffed, busy rangers.

The human population is also a key factor in increased bear-human encounters. The area's close proximity to urban areas puts the bears at higher likelihood of encountering novice hikers—people with ready access to nature and a lack of awareness of what that means. There's a mirroring happening in the area's human and bear populations. As they both have grown, so have interactions between the two. Compounding and affecting bear-human encounters are factors we might not instinctively consider: the highs and lows of resource availability to bears, the years of plenty and those of dearth.

Even visible, even at saturation, the bears around the New York State section of the AT are not as conspicuous as they could be. These are megafauna. They are half-ton bodies of bone and muscle and fur, and yet—although they are completely aware of us—their appearances are relatively rare. They wait in the wings. They fill in the cracks around humans and human activity like sand around stones, simultaneously ubiquitous and furtive.

I think of the traffic I could hear on the trail, and how I was fully aware of its presence. But I didn't, in fact, meet too many cars. Sometimes I had to cross a road and, then, I saw a car or two, but more often than not, I slipped across the road and no car was present to document my migration. I wonder whether, to bears, humans are something like the white noise of traffic sounds: as ever-present and as tedious as pollution.

After speculating that trees might be biding their time until the end of the Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh pauses: “But perhaps this is all wrong? After all, trees and humans are not—or not just—adversaries competing for space. They are also linked by innumerable forms of cooperation. Perhaps what is at fault here is the very idea of a single species.”

Maybe it isn't that we are stepping into bears' spaces, or that bears are coming into ours. Maybe space is more fluid than we envision it, with our lines and demarcations of order, our designations of wild from tame. The only certainty is that, in the blurring of these lines, we will encounter nature and its inhabitants in an ambivalent terrain.

MARGARET REDMOND WHITEHEAD's writing has appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The Atavist Magazine*, and *The Millions*. She earned a master's degree in literary reportage from New York University in 2016, was a literary journalism fellow at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in 2017, and was a Lambda Literary fellow in 2018.

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