

# Where the Wild Things Are

When a Port Orchard man was mauled by a bear last fall on a local bike trail, wildlife officials called it a highly unusual incident. But human/wildlife encounters are far from rare.

**Who is intruding on whose territory?**

And can we find a way to live side by side?

By Todd Matthews

ILLUSTRATIONS *by* FRANK STOCKTON





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or five years, Anthony Blasioli, a Port Orchard resident and Boeing software developer, was a frequent mountain biker at Banner Forest Heritage Park. The 635-acre greenspace in his neighborhood offers trails with steep dips, hoppable knolls and sharp curves that wind around ponds and marshes, and through densely packed vegetation of thick salal and tall trees. Surrounded by homes, it's hemmed in by two busy arterials that connect passengers from Southworth Ferry Terminal to the rest of the Kitsap Peninsula.

One Sunday afternoon last September, Blasioli, a fit 52-year-old outdoorsman who looks years younger, loaded his mountain bike into his pick-up truck, along with his two energetic German shorthaired pointers, Oak and Pine, and drove to the park's main trailhead. Once there, Blasioli rode shirtless on the hot day, steering his mountain bike over trails, while bars of sunlight angled through columns of trees. His dogs roamed, inspecting nearby shrubs and ravines, but always circling back to Blasioli. At one point, Pine raced ahead around a curve. When Blasioli heard the dog bark, he got off his bike to walk around the blind twist, in hopes of avoiding a collision with a hiker or another mountain biker.

What he encountered, instead, was a black bear.

"All of a sudden, this bear is right on me," says Blasioli, who recalls the encounter five months later from the back porch of his home, which sits on nearly 7 acres and overlooks an open field rimmed by a wooded area. He tosses a tennis ball to his dogs, who race into the field to retrieve it. "I mean, I was just there, I got off the

bike, then all of a sudden, 'Boom!' The bear is right there."

Blasioli's shock and panic make it difficult for him to recall exactly what happened next, but scars on his body tell the story. The upper flap of his right ear is gone, bitten off by the bear. Claw marks are faintly etched into the left side of his nose, chin and neck. A photo taken by emergency medical personnel at the E.R. soon after the attack displays a bloody shoulder with a clean slice across it, a shiny mass of shredded muscle exposed. The skin is gone, and a curved bone in his shoulder is bare—gleaming like a porcelain bowl. A bicycle helmet studded with tooth marks is an eerie souvenir from that day: The bear had gone after Blasioli's close-shaven scalp.

"I don't usually use this word, but it was surreal," says Blasioli. "All of this was happening, and I couldn't get away. I had come to the realization that, 'Oh, my God, I'm going to die.'" At one point, the bear held Blasioli upside down. "My feet were over his face," he recalls. "I remember I even tried to kick him a couple times in the face. It was real slow-motion. The bear wasn't growling or anything. It was kind of holding me. I don't remember how that part happened."

And then the bear let go.

Was it distracted? No one really knows. Despite his injuries, Blasioli was able to scramble away, climb on his bike and pedal toward the trailhead. He glanced behind to find the bear starting to charge again. "The doctor told me, 'Well, he probably didn't chase you too far because he would have caught you,'" says Blasioli. "I agree."

At the trailhead, he met a Port Orchard couple who dialed 911; medical person-

nel from a fire station a half-mile away quickly responded. He was taken to St. Joseph Medical Center in Tacoma, where doctors were able to save his arm. Two days later, a neighbor found one of his dogs; the man who called 911 located the other (both dogs bolted seconds after the attack). A week later, he was home again. A nurse visited regularly to change his bandages. A physical therapist helped Blasioli regain strength in his arm. State wildlife officials shut the park down for two weeks and attempted to capture the bear, but it was never found.

Though Blasioli is mountain biking again, he hasn't entirely recovered.

He returned to the park a few times, but found the experience produced too much anxiety for him and his dogs. "It kind of brings up a lot of memories," he says. "It's kind of—it's a bit scary. I quit going back." Sometimes, while walking through the woods on his own property—a setting similar to where he was attacked—he'll panic. Shortly after the attack, he couldn't pet the dogs because their fur reminded him of the bear. Even something as simple as handing a scrap of toast to the dogs at the kitchen table gives him chills. "I don't like that muzzle sticking out from under the table," he says with a nervous chuckle. "I want to see the whole dog."

**NEWS OF THE ATTACK** shocked the public, preying on its fears of wildlife encounters. Many people who head out onto trails—whether in the mountains or along a greenbelt—are haunted by the possibility of a wildlife attack.

And though bear attacks like Blasioli's are rare, as urban areas in western Wash-



ington encroach upon the wilderness, sightings and less dramatic encounters are not. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), which tracks the number of wildlife sightings by people living in urban areas, says that black bear and cougar sightings rose over the past decade, though the population of these animals has remained static. It points to a couple of factors: expansion of humans into traditional wildlife habitats, and wildlife that's become more acclimated to humans (their trash, their pets, their livestock) as sources of food. Bears who venture into urban settings, it says, are there for one main reason—the food scraps in your garbage can or dumpster.

Recent reports of local wildlife encounters have included multiple coyote sightings, particularly by residents of Capitol Hill and West Seattle, where residents claim the predators have killed cats and small dogs. Earlier this year, a coyote spotted in Discovery Park was spared a bounty hunt by U.S. Department of Agriculture and Seattle Parks Department officials because of public outcry to save the animal. In the Cascade foothill towns of Issaquah, Redmond, North Bend and Snoqualmie, cougars are spotted roaming through backyards and elementary

## BLACK BEARS IN THE NEWS

When black bears amble into urban areas, they're bound to make headlines, as these did.

- >> In May 2006, a 150-pound black bear wandered into the University District. A wildlife department official shot the bear with a tranquilizer dart to no effect, then employed an electric Taser gun as a defense. Officials had hoped to trap and relocate the bear, but in the end the bear died from the combination of tranquilizer and Taser.
- >> In May 2007, a man driving from North Bend to his home in Redmond struck and killed a 325-pound black bear on Interstate 90, totaling his car. The driver had only a few scratches.
- >> Also that May, a lighthouse caretaker on Maury Island was stunned to see a black bear wade into Puget Sound and swim two miles across to a beach near Des Moines. For two weeks, wildlife officials tracked the 204-pound bear; it was spotted in Kent and Federal Way, and along Interstate 5, finally lured into a trap laced with Krispy Kreme doughnuts, where it was shot by a wildlife official with a tranquilizer dart and relocated. T.M.

schoolyards. And black bear sightings have frequently made headlines (see sidebar "Black Bears in the News").

Still, in the state's history, no one has ever been killed, and only a half-dozen people have ever been attacked by a black bear. Most attacks occur when humans unknowingly come upon a black bear and startle it. It's a similar story for cougars. Some 2,500 wild cougars live in Washington state, according to the WDFW. (The exact number of cougars in western Washington is unknown because they are fairly elusive, according to one spokes-

person.) But no one has been killed by a cougar in 84 years; the last two non-fatal attacks, involving children in eastern Washington, occurred in 1998 and 1999.

With all of these wildlife sightings, however, one thing is clear: We are taking a walk on the wild side. Friends of the late WDFW biologist Rocky Spencer, an important figure in the department who died in a helicopter crash last year, recall a story Spencer told that sums up the issue: When residents in communities in the North Cascade foothills called



## TRACKING BEARS

Only some sightings warrant concern from the WDFW

Most black bear and cougar sightings originate in eastern King County. A resident who sights wildlife will call 911, where operators report the sighting or transfer the call to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Mill Creek office. Not every call warrants a response. Bears, cougars and other wildlife are elusive, and officers would waste a lot of time chasing down every lead with few results. But a few specific types of sightings draw officers into the field. One example: A black bear is repeatedly showing up in a neighborhood, typically to loot an unsecured dumpster. Another example: A cougar is spotted near an elementary school or a farm with livestock.

If a cougar, bobcat or bear kills livestock, it is put down. Bears messing with garbage cans, however, have a two-strike rule. Any bear captured in one of the WDFW's culvert traps is tranquilized and tagged on its ear. WDFW Sergeant Kim Chandler, who heads up a team of seven in charge of capturing wildlife, will hook the trap—a steel cylinder with a gate on one end, placed on a trailer—to the back of his truck and haul the drugged bear either to Lester, an unpopulated ghost town located just over Stampede Pass in the North Cascades, or farther east. If a tagged bear returns to the area and is recaptured, it is killed.

Capturing a food-conditioned bear known to hang out in a particular area is easy, says Chandler. His office has an informal arrangement with local Krispy Kreme stores, which provide him with free stale doughnuts. "Set a trap with a couple dozen doughnuts, and within a day or two, the bear will come around," he notes. One new angle on the catch-and-release tactic is to release the bear in the same area where it was captured, but with a twist, called a "hard release." As the bear comes to, wildlife officials yell, shoot rubber bullets and even use leashed Karelian bear dogs with an especially frightful bark, all so the bear will associate the horrible experience with the location where it was captured and never return. *T.M.*

A black bear, caught by WDFW officials, is released near Palmer (about 30 miles southeast of Seattle). One wildlife official has a gun with non-lethal ammunition to frighten the bear; the other has a lethal rifle—just in case



Spencer to complain about seeing a black bear roaming through their backyards, he would reply, "That's funny. I just got a call from a black bear complaining that there were humans in his backyard."

**CONSIDER THE WORLD** for a moment through the eyes of a black bear. It's mid-March, and you've just woken after four to five months of hibernation in the North Cascades. You've lost 40 percent of your body weight, and your need is singular: Find food fast. You're smart and know that if you wander five or 10 miles west to a community populated by humans, you'll probably find calorie-rich food: grease on a backyard grill, trash with food scraps, pieces of fruit or meat in compost piles, a bird feeder with protein-rich sunflower seeds. You even remember the locations of specific houses, garages and garbage cans.

There was a time when your home range spanned 10 or 20 miles and you roamed unchecked. Today that space is filled with highways and housing developments. If you're a bear who has been pushed out of an area by a larger bear staking his claim, you've run out of room with enough resources, food and potential mates. This is one of the reasons why some biologists believe black bears are increasingly spotted in urban areas.

Wildlife officials and local biologists place bears into one of two categories: habituated and food-conditioned. Habituated bears are accustomed to seeing people and being in areas where humans reside. They treat humans as a neutral entity; if there's no food to be had, the bear is typically on its way. Food-conditioned bears, however, are trouble. They've been through the area, found food and remember to return when hunger pangs set in. It doesn't take long for a bear to become food-conditioned, and biologists say these bears are known to teach their offspring to identify dumpsters, bird feeders and other food sources.

These are the bears whom WDFW Sergeant Kim Chandler, a 33-year veteran of the department, is in the business of capturing and returning to the wild. Chandler heads up a team of seven field officers who respond to all kinds of wildlife sightings in King County—black bears, cougars, coyotes and bobcats. Chandler was the person

**IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR A BEAR TO BECOME FOOD-CONDITIONED, AND BIOLOGISTS SAY THESE BEARS ARE KNOWN TO TEACH THEIR OFFSPRING TO IDENTIFY DUMPSTERS, BIRD FEEDERS AND OTHER FOOD SOURCES.**

who cornered, darted, Taser-ed and eventually killed a black bear who wandered into the University District in 2006.

Speak with Chandler and you sense frustration. A common misconception held by urban and suburban dwellers is that the WDFW is the agency that magically makes animals like black bears disappear. Two years ago, an Issaquah apartment manager who had listened to one too many complaints from tenants about a black bear roaming the complex, contacted Chandler: "You've got to get out here and do something about this bear!" When Chandler arrived, he found a dumpster wide open, its lid wedged against a concrete wall. "It couldn't even be closed, for crying out loud," says Chandler, who told the manager how he was contributing to the problem. The manager lobbied the waste management company for a new dumpster with a lock. Most of the complaints his office receives could be prevented by residents taking responsibility and implementing a few simple steps (see "Are You Bear Smart?" sidebar).

Chandler would like to see residents who live in black bear country take more ownership of bear-proofing their neighborhoods. His theory on why Blasioli was attacked goes like this: The dogs were running unleashed on the trail and came across the black bear either protecting a kill or sleeping in a small area nearby. The dogs started to bark, which agitated the bear. It was a tense situation that only escalated when Blasioli walked into it. There was no predation. The bear felt threatened, cornered and responded by fighting back. "Everybody comes out ahead in the end when you follow some recommended procedures," he adds. "Help yourself, help wildlife and help us."

**IN MANY AREAS AROUND** Seattle, development has pushed into the wilderness—and into bear territory. The planned community of Issaquah High-

lands, 15 miles east of Seattle, just off I-90, is a case in point. Wedged between Lake Sammamish and a vast, felt-green expanse of the North Cascades, the neighborhood has sprung up in the middle of the wilderness.

It seems everyone in and around this hillside community has a black bear story.

Gary Jensen, his wife, Denise, and son live in a rural area just below and northeast of Issaquah Highlands on 5 acres of a former ranch divided into parcels of various sizes. One evening last year, Denise pulled into the driveway to find a mother bear and her two cubs sitting on top of the family's large dumpster, fastened with a plastic lid. Remaining in the car and using her cell phone, she called Gary, who was in the house. He used a garage door opener to open and close the garage door, hoping to scare the bears away, but had no luck. He then got into his car and started to back it up toward the bears—and they ran away.

"Living out here, you just have to use common sense," says Jensen. "The main issue for us is garbage control." Since he bear-proofed his garbage, the bears haven't returned. Still, the family has spotted cougars, deer and coyotes around their home. "You'll hear some interesting noises," he says. "When a coyote eats a rabbit, you can hear it out there, and it's kind of noisy. But for the most part, the animals keep to themselves."

Local real estate agent Larry Cragun considers bear sightings a part of seasonal life in Issaquah Highlands. Last November, Cragun and his wife, Kathleen, were parked on a bluff and watching the sunset when a female black bear and three cubs came racing by their car and scrambled up a utility pole. He remembers hearing about two bears who wandered through a kids' soccer game last summer, temporarily interrupting the competition. "Wherever there's forest, there's bears," says Cragun. "We just sold a (continued on page 198)

## ARE YOU BEAR SMART?

If you live near black bears—and there are 25,000 in Washington state—you can take steps to live peacefully with them. Julie Hayes Hopkins, a wildlife biologist with the Grizzly Bear Outreach Project, educates residents in east King County and Kittitas County about wildlife safety. For tips on what to do if you encounter a bear, go to [bearinfo.org/bearsafety.htm](http://bearinfo.org/bearsafety.htm). Here are some of GBOP's tips for living in bear country:

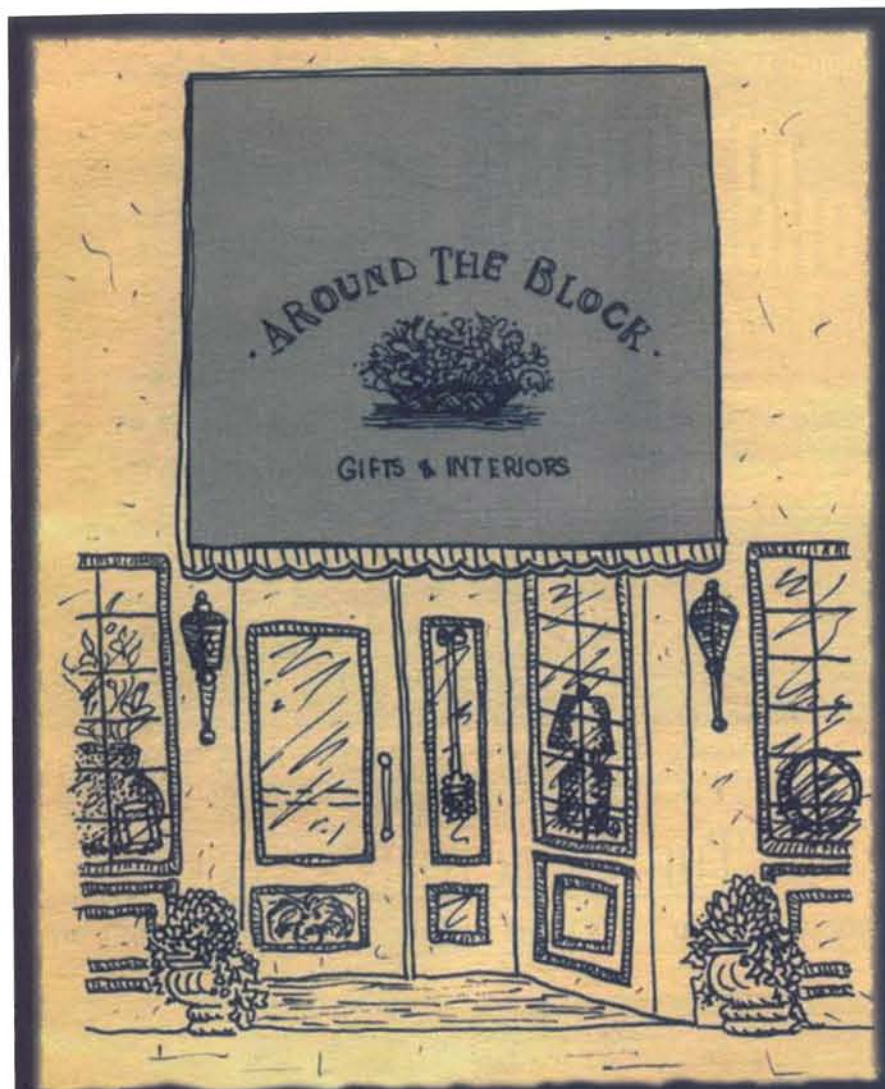
- >> Store garbage in a secured area.
- >> Feed birds only in winter or hang bird feeders 15 feet off the ground.
- >> Pick ripe fruit from trees and clean up fruit that has fallen to the ground.
- >> Do not put oil, grease, dairy products, meat, bones or fruit in your compost.
- >> Reduce compost odor by adding lime.
- >> Feed pets and store pet food indoors.

Also, be aware of the prevailing myths about wildlife—and act accordingly. >>

**MYTH:** If you see a cougar, it's stalking you (or your small child). **FACT:** "Ninety-nine percent of the time, you're not going to see that cougar just hanging around," says Sergeant Kim Chandler of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. "They don't hang out. They don't like little kids. Little kids make too much noise." Chandler remembers receiving a call from a man jogging on a trail on Cougar Mountain. A cougar was running right next to him, hissing and growling all the way. The man climbed onto a tree stump, and reached Chandler via his cell phone. Chandler talked him out of the situation (the man grabbed a stick and waved it around, scaring the cougar). "Most likely, there was a fresh kill nearby, or kittens," Chandler explains. If a cougar does attack—which Chandler emphasizes is extremely rare—"you're not going to see it. They are predatory by nature, and they attack from behind."

**MYTH:** Black bear attacks, like the one Anthony Blasioli experienced, are common. **FACT:** Most wild black bears are terrified of humans, Chandler says. Still, black bears have a comfort zone; cross that, and the bear's intense fear of humans can sometimes cause a fight-or-flight reaction.





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## Wild Things

(continued from page 95)

2.5-acre lot in Issaquah Highlands, in an area right on the forest edge. We told [the buyers] it was bear country, and they knew that. They seemed ready to deal with it."

Another resident, Blynn Shideler, lives on a quiet street off busy Black Nugget Road in the neighborhood's upper reaches. The route to his home passes by a new Sound Transit park-and-ride station and the first phase of a retail village along High Street—surrounded by dense Douglas fir trees. On some days, the treetops are shrouded in silver-white clouds like massive cobwebs. The view is one where nature and development collide; until the build-out was recently completed, the background music was incessant hammering, peppered with the beeps of heavy trucks backing up, working on new homes.

Shideler and his wife, Suzanne Bowman, know all the tips to keep bears away, but haven't been willing to make certain sacrifices. They moved into their two-story, mustard-colored home six years ago. It has a small backyard with a couple of felled logs and four bird feeders that butt up against a ravine so deep you can't see its bottom, and a forested greenbelt. A park and school are just over the ridge across the ravine. "Somewhere down there, two or three miles away, is where the bears live," says Shideler, who still sports a graying crewcut from his days as a soldier in Desert Storm. He and his wife have an affinity for birds, but they are planning to take down their bird feeders this year, knowing they attract bears. "I shouldn't have them out here," Shideler confesses. He has counted 31 different species of birds: four different species of woodpeckers, three different species of hummingbirds and a variety of thrushes. Even as he speaks, he points out that the birds squawking overhead are pine siskins. "The field and game people tell me not to put up the bird feeders. But I love birds."

The couple first spotted a bear while they were driving on Black Nugget Road a few months after moving to Issaquah Highlands. In a weird coincidence, they had been talking about how the neighborhood was known for its share of wildlife, and Bowman sang a line from *The Wizard of Oz*: "Lions and tigers and bears, oh

my!" Just then, they saw what first appeared to be a large dog. As they drove closer, they realized it was a black bear.

That experience was followed by visits from a number of black bears wandering through their backyard. One summer, Shideler watched a black bear remove a fly-through-style bird feeder from its post. (The post is still bent from the experience.) "He took that one back into the forest," he explains, "and I tracked him down for a ways, but couldn't go any farther." Next to go was a large, cylindrical feeder. Amazingly, three months later, the feeder was returned, empty. "The bear laid it on top of the log, thinking I would give him some more food," adds Shideler.

For a while, Shideler's solution was an electric fence, which he installed in 2003. But now that he's removing the bird feeders, he plans to remove the fence as well.

Homeowners who feel that bears "invade their space" concern Julie Hayes Hopkins, a wildlife biologist who covers the I-90 corridor for the Grizzly Bear Outreach Project (GBOP) and spends a lot of her time educating residents on living in black bear country. "People are kind of fickle," she explains. "We like animals we don't see very often because they are rare. When animals become something that we see really regularly, we start to care less about them. They become pests."

Hayes Hopkins points to raccoons and crows as examples of animals that are viewed as neighborhood pests because they are seen far too often in trash dumpsters. She fears black bears—as well as deer—are also headed down the pest path. Once that happens, humans could get more careless with their garbage, and bears could get more fearless around humans.

The result? We could see more encounters on the dramatic scale of Blasioli's. "Over time, people lose their respect for black bears, or they stop being careful about providing food for those bears," adds Hayes Hopkins. "They get complacent. 'Yeah, we see bears all the time. No big deal.' Then bears will get closer and closer to people. Inevitably, something will happen. It may mean one occurrence in 10,000, but if you allow wildlife to become so close to people, and so habituated, inevitably something is going to happen—whether it's the family dog that gets attacked or one of the family's kids." **S**

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