"Black Bear"—the New Exhibit at the Minnesota Zoo for a Triplet of Orphans

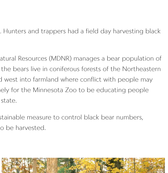
October 11, 2012

Contributing Editor Jordan Schaul interviews Tom Ness of the Minnesota Zoo about the new bear exhibit in Apple Valley.

The Medtronic Minnesota trail at the Minnesota Zoo in Minneapolis is home to one of the most complete living collections of Nearctic carnivorans in the world, if not the most complete. The exhibit features coyote, grey wolf, fisher, lynx, puma, wolverine, river otter, and now American black bear. The black bear is an iconic wildlife species and perhaps the most commonly known of the eight species of bears.

Black bears have made a comeback in many regions of their historic range after years of being exploited for their hides. They have been relentlessly persecuted for raiding crops or otherwise menacing people, or at least appearing to be trouble makers.

Although some populations have rebounded and continue to grow, other populations and subspecies, like the Louisiana black bear, face an uncertain future.



NAT GEO ARCHIVES

In Minnesota, as recent as the 1960's, black bears were perceived as varmints. Hunters and trappers had a field-day harvesting black bears for cheap bounty.

Today, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) manages a bear population of twenty thousand and growing. Most of the bears live in coniferous forests of the Northeastern part of the state, but many have moved west into farmland where conflict with people may begin to increase. Hence, it may be timely for the Minnesota Zoo to be educating people about human-black bear conflict in the state.

The MDNR permits sport hunting as sustainable measure to control black bear numbers, allowing about 3,000 animals per year to be harvested.

Times have changed and black bears are not despised as they once were in Minnesota. If anything people have a healthy respect for the species.

I suspect the three orphaned black bears at the Minnesota Zoo will serve to heighten awareness for bear conservation as they frolic in their new exhibit as captive ambassadors at the Zoo.



NAT GEO ARCHIVES

Interview:

Jordan: Among black bear exhibits built in accredited zoos, this must be one of the first dedicated to the species in a fairly long time? Was the exhibit initially part of the master plan for the Zoo?

Tom: No, black bears were not in the master plan for the early days of the zoo. I am told that as black bears were, and are not currently threatened and endangered it was the philosophy at the time (and a very valid one) to focus on species that needed the most help. However, black bears are a very important part of the heritage of MN and because bears and humans will increasingly have more conflicts as we continue to encroach into their native areas, we felt there is great value in adding these species to the MN Zoo. In 2006, when we started planning and development of the remodeling of the MN Trail, black bears were a species we wanted to include but the resources were not available at that time to do so. It is great that we were able to add this species now in 2012 to complete the renovation of the trail that started over 6 years ago.

Jordan: Can you share some specs on the display enclosure and holding areas? How does the new enclosure fit into the existing layout of Minnesota trail? And was there a particular location that the exhibit was modeled after or did you just have to work with existing space available.

Tom: The new bear habitat is at the end of the MN Trail across from the Puma and Canada Lynx habitats. This was an area that had not previously been developed, and is the last section of the trail to be developed. The concept the zoo's habitat was to simulate the bear's natural habitat here in MN. There are features in the habitat that allow the bears to exhibit normal wild behaviors such as climbing, digging and swimming. There is also an artificial cave that the bears have been using for afternoon naps and will be available to the bears if they hibernate and choose to do so in the public space of their habitat. Although they will have the option of hibernating in part of their habitat that is not viewable to the public if they choose that location instead.

Jordan: Can you tell me about the bears, their history and how they have been adjusting to their new enclosure? Have they done anything surprising since they have been on exhibit?

Tom: There are two male and one female black bear. All three were orphaned separately in Northern MN in 2010 near the Leech Lake Area. They were rescued by MN DNR and transported to the DNR approved rehab facility. The MN Zoo was already in the early phases of designing the new habitat and worked with MN DNR to transfer these animals to the zoo. Since the fall of 2010, the bears were in a non public area built for the temporary housing of the bears until the new habitat on the MN trail was completed.



COURTESY OF THE MN ZOO

The great things about these particular bears is that two of them are the more common 'black' color phase, but the third has the 'cinnamon' or brown color phase. Something most people don't know is that not all black bears are black. Black bears have the most diverse colors of the bear family and can vary from very dark black, to a light black/grey (sometimes called "glacier"), dark brown to light brown (blond) and there are even some black bears that are all white. White or "spirit" bears are very rare, and are almost unheard of in MN, but they are the only color phase protected under MN law (they can't be hunted). Brown colored bears are not common, but at the same time are not rare either. As there are no brown (grizzly) bears in MN, this is not a problem in that if you see a wild bear in MN it is a black bear, but in areas where black and brown bears both exist, it is important for people to be able to tell the difference as their behavior and reactions towards humans are very different.

The most surprising thing the bears have done is how quickly they adjusted to the new habitat, both the behind the scenes area and the public areas. I think this is a great example of how adaptable bears are in general, but also that the zookeeper staff had done such an excellent job in getting the animals ready for the move.

Jordan: Will the Zoo be promoting any complementary education and conservation initiatives to coincide with the recent opening of the exhibit.

Tom: The main focus of the new habitat, and of the Minnesota Trail in general, is to highlight the great species found here in MN, but also how to peacefully coexist; working to reduce conflict between people and wildlife. We have graphics at the exhibit focusing on this topic as well as educational material incorporated into our pre-existing programs and classes offered by the Education Department. The zoo is not currently supporting black bear field research black bears are doing well in the wild and research and monitoring is being done by DNR and other agencies as a game species. The zoo has however supported several other bear field projects for Sun Bears in Southeast Asia and Brown Bears in the Russian Far East.

Jordan: Did you play a large role in designing the exhibit? What were some challenges?

Tom: The design and construction of any zoo habitat is always exciting and challenging. There are three primary areas we look at for any new habitat; the first is what are the animal's needs. What do they need to be mentally, socially and physically healthy. The second is the maintenance and servicing of the habitat; how do the keepers clean the habitat, how we will meet the medical needs of the animals, how do we replace deadfall (dead trees) and live plants, and of course in MN, what do you do for snow removal, just to name a few areas. The third area we look at is guest experience. Research continues to show that zoo guests not only enjoy watching animals in more natural habitats, but that they will spend more time watching animals in natural habitats and come away with a stronger desire to conserve that species and wild habitat. It is always a challenge to meet all three of these within the resource constraints, but we have an excellent team of people at the zoo that are experts in all of these areas and that consult with other experts on the best way to maximize these needs with budget available.

In Changing Planet

Tags Jordan Carlton Schaul

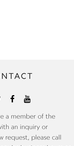
MEET THE AUTHOR

With training in wildlife ecology, conservation medicine and comparative psychology, Dr. Schaul's contributions to Nat Geo Voices have covered a range of environmental and social topics. He draws particular attention to the plight of imperiled species highlighting issues at the juncture or nexus of sorta situ wildlife conservation and applied animal welfare. Sorta situ conservation practices are comprised of scientific management and stewardship of animal populations ex situ (in captivity / 'in human care') and in situ (free-ranging / 'in nature'). He also has a background in behavior management and training of companion animals and captive wildlife, as well as conservation marketing and digital publicity. Jordan has shared interviews with colleagues and public figures, as well as editorial news content. In addition, he has posted narratives describing his own work, which include the following examples: • Restoration of wood bison to the Interior of Alaska while (While Animal Curator at Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center and courtesy professor at the University of Alaska) • Rehabilitation of orphaned sloth bears exploited for tourists in South Asia (While executive consultant 'in-residence' at the Agra Bear Rescue Center managed by Wildlife SOS) • Censusing small wild cat (e.g. ocelot and margay) populations in the montane cloud forests of Costa Rica for popular publications with 'The Cat Whisperer' Mieshelle Nagelschneider • Evaluating the impact of ecotourism on marine mammal population stability and welfare off the coast of Mexico's Sea of Cortez (With Boston University's marine science program) Jordan was a director on boards of non-profit wildlife conservation organizations serving nations in Africa, North and South America and Southeast Asia. He is also a consultant to a human-wildlife conflict mitigation organization in the Pacific Northwest. Following animal curatorships in Alaska and California, he served as a charter board member of a zoo advocacy and outreach organization and later as its executive director. Jordan was a member of the Communication and Education Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (CEC-IUCN) and the Bear Specialist Group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (BSG-SSC-IUCN). He has served on the advisory council of the National Wildlife Humane Society and in service to the Bear Taxon Advisory Group of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA Bear TAG). In addition he was an ex officio member of council of the International Association for Bear Research and Management. Contact Email: jordan@jordanschaul.com http://www.facebook.com/jordan.schaul https://www.linkedin.com/in/jordanschaul/ www.jordanschaul.com www.bxcoastalreputationmanagement.com

Previous Post
First Video of Rare Brightly Colored Seahorse

Next Post
Expert Voices: Arnoud Molenaar, Manager, Rotterdam Climate Proof, City of Rotterdam

RELATED POSTS



A day to celebrate the "honey bears"

Escaped Wolf Dispatched at Minnesota Zoo as a Last Resort--Interview with Tony Fisher

Last week an endangered Mexican wolf was dispatched at one of the nation's leading captive conservation centers in Apple Valley, Minnesota. A decision to resort to lethal measures

The Long Journey of an Orphaned Kodiak Bear

ABOUT NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

The National Geographic Society is an impact-driven global nonprofit organization that pushes the boundaries of exploration, furthering understanding of our world and empowering us all to generate solutions for a healthy, more sustainable future for generations to come. Our ultimate vision: a planet in balance.

CONTACT

If you are a member of the media with an inquiry or interview request, please call during regular business hours or email

pressroom@ngs.org

(202) 857 7027

©1996-2014 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.