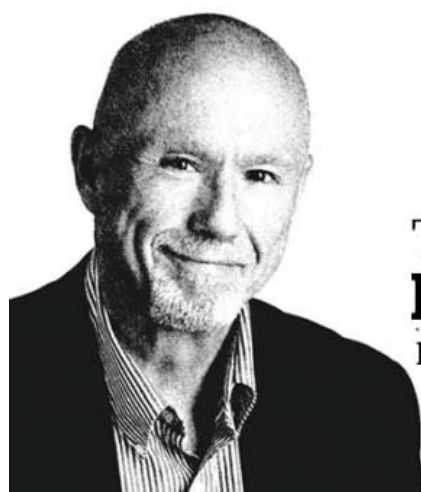


SULLIVAN: It's no easy living where the wild things are

Paul Sullivan / contributing writer

September 18, 2015 12:00 AM



The
NORTH SIDE
Paul Sullivan

If you live on the North Shore, the odds are you've had more than one close encounter with the wild things.

After all, we live on the edge of one of the world's last great wildernesses, a hinterland that starts at the Grouse Grind and goes all the way to Alaska.

This wilderness is home to much of what's left of the planet's animal population, and so it's not surprising that some of them can be found rummaging around in your garbage or hanging out in your hot tub.

For us, it's thrilling and a bit chilling, especially when the visitor weighs 150 or 200 kilos and comes with big teeth and claws, all the better to eat you with.

But for the visitor, it's mainly fatal. The death toll is depressing: in the last four years, B.C. "conservation" officers have dispatched 352 cougars, 72 grizzly bears and a stunning 1,872 black bears, mainly for doing what comes naturally: hunting for food.

The tragic absurdity of all this came to a climax in July when one conservation officer decided to conserve, rather than destroy, two little black bear cubs he had orphaned after complying with government policy by shooting their mother.

As we all know by now, the government suspended him for not killing the cubs, too. After much social media sound and fury, the conservation officer is back on the payroll and the two cubs are enjoying the hospitality of the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre near Parksville. They now have names — Athena and Jordan — and you can go online and adopt one for \$25.

Are they ever cute. The centre will have them for 18 months and then they will be reintroduced into the wild, head for the nearest tasty trash, get shot by a conservation officer and end up tossed on the pile with the other 1,872 former miscreants.

If you're a fan of bitter irony, the whole idea of calling them "conservation officers" might strike you as funny, but I can see how "government bear assassins" won't do.

I suppose we can't have coyotes and cougars and bears (oh my) wandering around at will, dining out on trash and terriers. And it's no use moaning about how they're only trying to survive — which they are — or that they were here first, which they were.

But a less bureaucratic assessment of the danger might help. For many years, I lived close to Mosquito Creek, which is a wildlife superhighway and the shortest direct route to some of the best eating on the North Shore.

One day after Thanksgiving, we found ourselves hosting a follow-up feast for a huge mother black bear and her two cubs — the same configuration that got the conservation officer suspended.

Momma bear took out the garbage can, bungee cords and all, sat down and calmly finished off the turkey carcass while the cubs frolicked on the lawn.

When she finished, she gathered up the kids and went and wreaked holiday havoc on Highland Boulevard. I'll never forget that lady in her robe and curlers trying to direct traffic around the bears, who eventually found their way back to the creek and into the woods.

As exciting as it was (and there's nothing more exciting than a 150-kilo bear squatting in your driveway), the last thing I wanted was for the "conservation" officers to end the whole pageant with three quick shots to the head.

The least we can do is assess each situation and actually try to conserve the lives of our magnificent neighbours.

I realize this kind of talk leaves me open to scorn. I'll be called a bleeding heart, or worse, a liberal. After all, black bears aren't even an endangered species. ... Yet.

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