

Waterman Fund Essay Contest Winner

A Place for Everything

A bear wanders into a crowded campground

Katherine Dykstra



Editor's note: The winner of the fifth annual Waterman Fund essay contest, which Appalachia sponsors jointly with the Waterman Fund, ventures into new territory. In the previous four years of the contest, writers have reflected on the ways civilization encroaches on the wilderness. This year's winner turns it around, describing the clash of wild animals with a busy car campground. More black bears show themselves near Delaware Water Gap, on the New Jersey–Pennsylvania border, than most people will ever see in darkest Maine. Katherine Dykstra's honest story of what happened when she met her first bear on her first camping trip left us squirming and thinking harder about what happens when wild animals wander into settled areas. The Waterman Fund is a nonprofit organization named in honor of Laura and the late Guy Waterman. It is our mission to encourage new writers. See the end pages of this journal for information about next year's contest.

WE'D THROWN THE TRIP TOGETHER IN A FLURRY OF PHONE CALLS and email exchanges all in 48 hours. Parker researched state parks, campgrounds, driving times. Ann went to a dollar store and bought four nylon camping chairs. I went to Target and came away with two tents.

There was a moment when we nearly called the whole thing off, Seth having phoned every rental car company in the five boroughs and coming up dry; it was Fourth of July weekend after all. But dogged in his pursuit, he eventually found a car that had been returned early. It was the last, we believed, in the city.

As we inched our way west on Canal Street, Seth caught my eye in the rearview mirror: "So I hear you're worried about bears," he said, amused.

Ann, tiny and brunette, twisted around in her seat and smiled at me in the same way an adult might smile at a child who simply didn't know any better. I felt myself turn red. As we'd made our preparations to flee the city, I happened to notice that nearly every page of the Delaware Water Gap website mentioned the area's disproportionate population of black bears. But when I'd brought this to Parker's attention—"Um, do you think we'll be mauled by bears?"—he'd laughed, "That's what you're worried about? Bears? There won't

Unperturbed by a human watcher, a black bear feeds on acorns in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. RICH POPE

be any bears. And anyway, I'll be there to protect you." After he said this, he puffed up his chest and ape-walked toward me, catching me in his arms.

The website had included a twenty-item checklist of things to do to ensure a bear did not find his way to your campsite as well as instructions for what to do if he did. When I persisted, suggesting we keep our food in the trunk of our car, tie our trash up in a tree, Parker had said, "OK, how about this? You can be our resident bear expert." At which point I knew to proceed was to risk catching a lot of flak later.

Looking straight-faced at Seth in the rearview mirror, I lied, "I'm not worried." Outside the car, a man dug through a trash can while tourists swarmed around him. "I just wanted to make sure we were taking the right precautions." I said this in my best Little Miss Perfect voice hoping to convey that I knew worrying about bears was ridiculous. I was, however, quite worried. When I was young, my father had taken my brother and me on weeklong camping trips to the Rocky Mountains, but this was the first time I'd been camping as an adult. And where as a child it never occurred to me that there was anything my father couldn't protect me from, as an adult, I knew that when a man and nature collided on nature's turf, nature usually won.

"Well," said Seth, "I've been camping hundreds of times and I've never seen a bear." I knew that taking this line of discussion any further would do nothing for me. This trip was supposed to be fun. We were getting out of the city. Worrying about bears was a downer. I let it go.

Which was doable, as I was choosing to take heart in the fact that that morning, before we'd left, Parker had done nature a favor, not an easy feat in a city where nature barely exists. He had been out on the fire escape when he spotted a bird, hanging upside down in a tree and frantically flapping her wings to no avail. "I have to help her," he'd said after pointing her out to me. "Right?" He looked unsure, like he might have wanted me to stop him, but then drug the ladder out anyway. I watched from our second-floor window as he hauled himself onto the fence that separated our apartment building from the backyard of the brownstone behind us and then climbed up into the tree. His position, clinging to one branch, was precarious and I worried for him as I watched all the birds in the neighborhood, likely fearing their friend's safety, circle him like war planes, one even clipping him on the ear. When he finally came back inside, he told me that the bird had managed to tie her foot to a tree branch with some dental floss likely while building her nest. He'd untied

her from the tree and then held her in one gloved hand while he untied the floss from her leg.

A couple years before—pre-Parker—in another apartment, I'd awakened one morning to an amazing clatter. Sitting up in bed I found myself eye to eye with a baby pigeon that appeared to have crash-landed on my air conditioning unit, presumably while attempting first flight. He stood there shaking, a ball of downy fluff and feathers, four stories up with panic in his eyes. I wanted to help him but I didn't know how; I was afraid of him in the same way I was afraid of the stray cats in my Brooklyn neighborhood; what if he had something? "Having something," being the way my mother has warned me away from wildlife all my life, as in, "Don't touch that kitten! It might have something." And so my pigeon stayed there, beak-to-glass until I left for work. On the way to the subway, I called my landlord and told him about the bird, asked what I should do. He seemed unsure and said to leave it up to him. When I got home that evening, the bird was gone. I feared it had plummeted to its death. A friend tried to comfort me with the words *natural selection*. Parker, I thought in the car, would have tried to save it.

We four arrived at Dingman's Campground with just enough time to pitch the tents before night fell. It had been a mad dash, but we'd done it. We sat around the campfire covertly drinking beer (the campsite was dry), idealistically talking about stories we wanted to tell, films we wanted to make. Anything seemed possible from the vantage point of our small success. At a reasonable hour we turned in, set on rising early the next day.

But once in the tent, the good feeling was gone, and I couldn't sleep. Wedged into the angle where the forest floor met a snoring Parker, my ears were sharp for any sound. I listened hard to the night trying to distinguish the difference between plant-life rustling in the wind, acorns falling onto the tarp, and the footfalls of an animal keen on ripping our tent apart with its teeth. When the sun rose, I was already awake, feeling as if I hadn't slept at all.

But the day dawned bright and beautiful. We cooked bacon and eggs over the fire for breakfast. We took off on a two-hour hike that ended at a waterfall, swam in the Delaware River, and fished from the shore. Back at camp that evening, we ate burgers on buns with onions and barbecue sauce, potatoes roasted with peppers, baked beans, everything slightly burned. Lounging around the campfire with river water in our hair, it felt good. Like we'd won.

I cracked a beer, tipped my head back, and was surprised to find that up through the pines, tall as buildings over our heads, the sky was still day-blue. Shadows had crept in along the ground as we'd cooked. Looking back, this is likely why we didn't notice him until he was right up on us.

"Oh my god," said Parker, in a low voice that betrayed both astonishment and fear, and made me look up immediately. At first he looked like the big black dog we'd seen racing after a stick earlier that day, but this guy was bulkier, wide as a wheelbarrow, and he moved slowly like a monster patiently taking a city.

"We're going to get up, and we're going to walk away."

I felt proud of how quickly Parker seized control of the situation, but I couldn't move, my eyes fixed on the bear, waiting to see what he would do.

"Now!" Parker hissed. "We are all going to get up, and we're going to walk away." This time I stood. And kind of walk/skipped through the trees to the adjacent campsite where a middle-aged couple had just pulled out a pair of pork chops.

"There's a bear in our campsite," I whispered, realizing I'd abandoned all my stuff. I envisioned the bear ransacking our tents, devouring my iPhone, my camera in a fit of rage.

"Yup," said the man, barely looking up. "I see 'im."

"You can get in our van if you like," the man's lady friend offered. I straightened at their nonchalance, turned around.

Rather than bury his face in the picnic table covered in half eaten bags of chips, green salsa, and packages of hot dogs and buns, he ambled right up to the tree where we'd tied up our trash. After a moment of what looked like thought, he expertly stood on his hind legs, rested one paw against the trunk of the tree, and gently took the bag off the rope we'd tied it to. He then sauntered away over the hill, holding the trash as if he were taking it out.

Ann turned to me her eyes the size of salad plates. "I have never seen a bear while camping before!" She gripped my forearm, as if to say, 'Please believe me!' As if I thought that, in an attempt to alleviate my fear, she'd lied the day before. I did believe her. But that was beside the point. More than fear, now I felt satisfaction. My worry had been warranted.

We deliberated for a moment—bear, campsites, children—and decided it was best to alert the ranger, and so Seth and Ann took our rental car to the lodge. Not a moment after they pulled away, Parker and I watched as the bear lumbered back into view at a campsite across the way. He stopped in front of a picnic table draped in mosquito netting.

“Ohhh,” said Parker, with the same laughing inflection he uses when he watches something explode on TV. “He’s going to destroy that thing!”

He had dug out my camera and was clicking away in the bear’s direction. I felt giddy too, in the daylight and at a distance; I was ready to see some destruction. But the show was not spectacular. After shifting his weight back and forth for a moment, the bear merely walked on to the next site and then the site after that until he’d walked out of view, at which point we saw a girl run quickly in the other direction. I was disappointed to see him go, both because I wanted to keep an eye on him—he was frightening, the size of a pedicab and all that pent-up power roiling through his body—and because I was hypnotized by him, by his beauty—sleek black coat, onyx eyes, and velvet nose. I knew I had just witnessed something special, something I might never see again. But he didn’t come back, and all was quiet until Seth and Ann returned with the rangers.

Parker and I pointed them in the right direction. After they’d pulled away, Ann frantically began cleaning up the picnic table, throwing everything half eaten into a new trash bag, which she then shook in her outstretched hand at Seth: “This was what he wanted; I don’t want it here.” She said this with wide eyes and a smile, mocking her own panic, but was totally serious. Seth shrugged, “I’ll take it to the Dumpster.” I offered to join him, jumping at the chance to use an actual toilet—there was one at the entrance to the campground.

When we got there, we ran, once again, into the bear. He was stumbling through the forest and turning at odd angles. He seemed confused; when we stopped the car, rolled down the windows, I understood why. The rangers had driven their truck into the trees and were charging him with lights on, sirens blaring. One ranger, who barely fit in his uniform, yelled through a megaphone alternately at the bear: “Please leave our campsite! We are asking you nicely!” and at the crowd of campers who had assembled behind him: “Back away! This bear is aggressive! He charged me! I’m not kidding!”

Another ranger got out of the truck carrying a long, thin rifle. I looked at Seth, raised my eyebrows.

“It’s a tranquilizer gun,” said Seth, one wrist hooked over the steering wheel. “They’ll knock him out and drop him off somewhere else so he can’t find his way back.”



Katherine Dykstra. PARKER CHEHAK

The energy of the crowd outside our car had reached a frenzy. The fat ranger was now more concerned with keeping back a group of half-clad 20-somethings falling all over themselves in excitement than he was with the bear behind him. I looked at the small, dark shape turning circles in the trees amid the flashing lights and the tinny screech of the bullhorn, and felt an overwhelming sadness.

Seth rolled his eyes. “Idiots,” he said. We dumped our trash, headed back to our campsite.

Seth and I told Parker and Ann what we’d seen. We all wondered what the rangers would do, what would become of the bear. Seth pointed out that he had seen a tag in the bear’s ear, which likely meant that the bear had entered a campsite before. We agreed the bear was young, not a cub, but maybe a tween, and we wondered whether his mother would come looking for him. And when we were done talking about that, we sat in uneasy silence in the growing dark. As if suddenly we were unsure of our business there between those trees.

We stayed up late that night. We watched as all points of light around our site were snuffed out until it was just us crouched around our campfire, a glowing circle in the infinite dark. We roasted and ate an entire package of hot dogs. We told stories of camping when we were kids, but didn’t quite listen to one another. We drank Jameson out of a water bottle and killed an entire case of beer, tossing our crushed empties in a pile on the ground, so different from the night before when we took care to hide them in our tents, open them under a cough, pour them in the shadows. The night before there had been a circling car, a ranger we assumed on the lookout. Tonight he was gone. We were alone. It was as if the rules no longer applied.

Seth passed out in his chair and when he woke up again, he convinced us that eating the second package of hot dogs was a good idea. Parker, drunk, tried to engage us in a sing-along we’d once done at a party in LA, but the mood was so different. I had managed to drink myself sober, alert in my nylon chair.

By 3 A.M., we were all spent and ready for it to be over, but early on, Seth had put a four-foot-long log onto the fire; it still hadn't burned into the pit, and Parker insisted we wait up until the log fit.

"Everything must be contained in the pit," he slurred. "That is the rule, everything has to be contained."

I understood his meaning. There are certain rules one has to follow when a guest in the wild. We needed to follow those rules, to finish what we had started. I thought perhaps if we did, everything would be OK.

Seth and Ann sat in their chairs, heads rolled back, sometimes speaking, while I stood over the flame, maniacally twisting the log into the heart of the fire as Parker knelt before it and blew.

When we finally crawled into our tents, I lay on my back, the beer buzzing in my ears, and wondered what the rangers had done with the bear. I wasn't afraid anymore. Instead, I felt a part of the forest around me.

The next morning, hung over, slow moving, almost ashamed, we broke down the tents, packed up the car. We put the rest of the food—potatoes, eggs, bacon—all together in one pot, cooked it and called it cowboy mash. I had one bite. It made me want to throw up. Then we went to the lodge to check out.

"What happened with the bear last night," I asked the woman behind the counter as she stabbed a calculator with her pointer finger.

"He got aggressive, and he wouldn't leave the campground, so they had to kill him," she said without looking at me.

My stomach sank. "They killed him?"

"He was aggressive and he wouldn't leave the campground."

"Of course he was aggressive," said a leathery man who stood on the other side of the register. "You were chasing him."

"He was aggressive," she repeated.

I walked outside carrying the weight of what we had done.

"They killed him," I said to the other three.

"I will never come back here again," said the wife of the leathery man as she came down the steps of the lodge. "He wasn't aggressive. We were the first people to see him at our campsite; he just walked in. I got my camera!"

We got back in our car and sat silent. All I could think is that we had left the city, come out to the country, shot a bear, and now we were going home.

"It wasn't our fault," Ann said from the back seat.

"Yeah, he was tagged," Seth said. "It was only a matter of time."

"I know," I said. And I did. And yet.

When we told the story to our friends, families, coworkers, they said that there was an overpopulation of bears in that area, that the rangers had to kill him to protect the site. And of course, I didn't want the bear to have hurt anyone. But if the rangers were protecting the site, my question was, who was protecting the bear?

I flashed on a summer day when my brother John and I had arrived at my mother's house in North Carolina at the same time a man from animal control was ridding the attic of a nest of bats. As they swooped out of the house over our heads, hundreds of black shapes filling the air above us with flapping wings and little screams, one fell to the concrete in front of me. The Bat Man picked it up by the tips of its wings, and showed it to me—little fangs and beady blinking eyes—I shrunk away, “Ew.”

“Aw,” said John, gently. “He's just trying to be a bat.”

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