

A Cl🐾se Encounter

By Steve Schwartz

photos provided by author

Wednesday July 18, 2012. Town of Indian Lake, near Sabael, in the central Adirondacks, Hamilton County, NY.

“There’s a bear in the house!”

I suppose there are worse things one could hear at 2 a.m. in a pitch-black room, but I can’t think of many. Our adult daughter, Ingrid, had burst into our sleeping quarters in Indian Lake, sounding excited but not exactly panicked.

Ten extended family members, including three of our adult children, four grandchildren, and a friend were renting a cottage on the lake shore. We had rented the cottage for a week and were having a lovely time. The night was warm and muggy, so we had left most of the screened windows open to let in the night breeze.

“There’s a bear in the house?” I thought groggily, making sure I had heard her correctly. Indeed, there was a bear.

...locals told us that this was the first time in memory that a bear had entered a cottage to forage for food.

According to my daughter’s account, she had been sleeping near the kitchen when she heard rude noises and assumed one of us was snacking, which is unlikely given our habits. She had a small flashlight and shined it on the kitchen floor through a small hole in the door and saw garbage and food strewn about. “Damn, a raccoon got in,” she thought. She raised the flashlight to scan the area and saw that it was a black bear. She immediately woke us up.

The first thing I said was, “Call the police!” Of course, we had no landline phone, and no cell coverage. Ingrid handed me the flashlight, and I got focused quickly. I shined it toward the kitchen and there was a medium-sized bear calmly dining on pasta and ramen in the pantry. In the pitch black I grabbed my camera, opened the kitchen door wide, took a picture of the bear and quickly shut the door. By now another adult daughter, Liz, and her



boyfriend had stumbled around behind me. I opened the door again and flashed another shot of the bear. This time it seemed to move toward me. I jumped back and banged into someone standing behind me. At this point it felt like a kind of melee. The truth is, we were scared and had no idea what to do. How does one get a bear out of the house?

Our uninvited, four-legged intruder was more than just a nuisance, as there were small children sleeping in two rooms



A broken screen and muddy pawprints on the siding show how the bear got into the house.

(with doors ajar) on either side of the pantry. Ignoring the bruin was not an option. We thought we should bang pots and pans to make noise, but they were in the kitchen near the bear. I had a boat horn somewhere, but couldn't immediately find it in the dark. Maybe just shouting would work. However, if any of these didn't work, they might wake the sleeping kids, and cause a terrible encounter.

I looked into the kitchen again, and thankfully, the bear was gone, perhaps scared off by the flash of the camera. What a relief! The place was empty except for food and garbage all over the floor, and the smell! The odor was powerful, like the worst wet dog you have ever smelled, times ten.

I sheepishly admit that we had not taken out the garbage because of heavy rain earlier. The owners had admonished us to remove the garbage by 7 p.m. every day. Oops.

When we investigated, we saw that the bear had broken a screen and entered through a low window in an entrance vestibule off the kitchen. Apparently, it had exited by the same route.

We cleaned up the mess, patrolled outside a bit, exchanged excited notes on the event, and actually tried to go back to sleep. We didn't sleep too well the rest of that night, or the next. We kept lots of lights on. The bear did not return. I feel that we were quite lucky that the camera flash scared the bear.

The little kids were basically undisturbed, except they played "bear attack" with growling and howls of laughter on and off for the rest of our vacation.

The next day, locals told us that this was the first time in memory that a bear had entered a cottage to forage for food. One question that immediately arises is, "What should you do if you are confronted in the middle of the night with a hungry bear in your cottage?"

Steve Schwartz resides in Ithaca and is a long-time subscriber of *Conservationist*.

Editor's Note: We asked DEC biologists what they recommend in this type of situation. Here's what they said: "The best thing to do in such a situation is to keep your distance and make as much noise as possible (using whatever means at your disposal), turn on lights, and generally try to startle the bear into leaving. The flash of the camera here thankfully had the desired effect on the bear. People should also immediately call local law enforcement, or the DEC dispatch, so an officer can respond. In most cases, DEC will attempt to trap a bear that has entered an occupied building, and euthenize it. It's important to keep in mind that every situation is different and like all wild animals, bears are highly unpredictable—especially when trapped in a building. It's best if you can avoid something like this from happening by practicing good habits so that bears are not enticed to enter a dwelling in the first place." (See page 25.)