

Bears in the Backyard

A fondness for bears is an emotion often sparked in early childhood, drawn from fables, stories, movies, and cartoons—or for the lucky youngster—a visit to Yellowstone National Park. There is something about bears that make them oafishly adorable. I was smitten by them too, not as a youngster but rather as an undergraduate during a field research project in Yosemite National Park. Our team's assignment was to locate the day-denning sites of black bears in Yosemite Valley. The park biologist had us shadow the bears on foot at dawn's light to find where along the valley slopes they spent the day after a night of feasting on dumpster leftovers or crashing the occasional evening picnic. Assisting in the capture of a few of these dumpster raiders made me realize that bears up close are impressive in claw and girth (and wear a very strong natural cologne). We never published our results but the memories still linger—it was the most adventurous summer of my young life.

This summer, Montgomery County residents have had a great chance to see a black bear (though it could be more than one) as he wanders widely about our area. That he reportedly crossed Routes 495, 95 North, and 70 without mishap is remarkable. For those afraid of this visitor, a local biologist says not to worry. This shaggy tourist will eventually find his way back to western Maryland, home to over a thousand bears. The reason: in Montgomery County he is unlikely to find a female to mate with.

I am not so sure. We may soon be entering



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A Black Bear reaching for wild persimmons.

the era of *Ursus americanus suburbanus*, a new subspecies of black bear that is ready to join us for year-round occupancy in Cabin John and environs, not the occasional wander-about. Other biologists speculate that bears will soon be hibernating within Montgomery County. There is plenty of food around, good habitat, and places to den. And for those bears clever and alert enough to avoid that great individual selection event—encounters with trucks and automobiles—relative safety. Locals from Bethesda to Bannockburn are more likely to grab a camera than a hunting rifle if they see a bear about.

Before bears do hibernate, they must put on rolls and folds of fat to carry them through winter, gaining up to 30 pounds a week prior to bedding down for a long season of sleep. One of the best sources in the forest for a high carb treat—if a bear can locate it and beat the raccoons and possums to the windfall—is a fruiting persimmon tree. Many mammals relish the sweet, ping-pong-ball-sized

fruits of a wild persimmon, and they are a great source of energy. As suggested by the Latin name *Diospyros virginiana*, these wild trees are common in our area.

Yet most Marylanders know the persimmon only from the supermarket; all but neophytes know that if you fail to remove the skin before eating one you will be taught the meaning of the word *astringent* through direct experience. The persimmon's extreme astringency is likely a holdover adaptation that kept elephants, mastodons, giant ground sloths, and other prehistoric persimmon eaters from taking the fruit before the seeds had hardened. The evolutionary mechanism at work is that those persimmon trees that lacked the pre-ripening puckering quality present in the fruit skin had their seeds digested more readily and did not reproduce compared to those that concentrated extra tannins in the skin and repelled over-eager green persimmon eaters.

Diospyros virginiana is considered to have been a favorite of the megafauna that roamed North America and likely Montgomery County until 10,000 years ago. These giant mammals are no longer with us but we still have small omnivores like raccoons and opossums to disperse the seeds. Biologists thus speculate that the loss of the giant plant-eaters in historical times has had no effect on the survival and range of the American Persimmon in contrast to two other trees—the Kentucky Coffeetree and Osage Orange—the fruits of the latter look like green brains on the road in the fall and are inedible to contemporary mammal fauna. The ranges of these two tree species have likely diminished in the absence of giant mammals to eat them.

We will never again see a giant ground sloth lumbering down Persimmon Tree Road in Cabin John, but we will likely see black bears foraging in the backyards for fruits and oak acorns and among the wild persimmon trees that dot the area.

On autumn nights, I sometimes wake to the sounds of ripe persimmon fruits plunking on our roof tiles. The fruits roll to the patio where our two dogs wait to devour the sweet pulp. They have become so attuned to the sound of falling persimmons that they whine at the door to be let out if even a single fruit hits the roof. Perhaps someday I will wake to hear them barking furiously, announcing the arrival of a black bear. This would be a scene better viewed from the living room window. —