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We can learn from a bear's market

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Blue Grass changed from 100-degree August to 50-degree August in two days. The leaves on the yellow locust have turned brown, and the black cherry is starting to yellow. Where has the summer gone? Where have the last 40 gone?

I was driving a cart of firewood out of the woods in the late afternoon on our first "cold" day when a small black bear -- maybe 100 pounds -- loped across the road about 10 yards in front of my ATV. He cast one look of annoyance and another of contempt in my direction, and then ambled into the bush. I had disturbed his evening meal.

I stopped dead and scanned for Momma. The bear looked big for a cub, but you never know about the high-sugar diets kids get these days.

Bear sign is common in the woods on Devil's Backbone. I always find fresh scat. Big rocks are routinely overturned in the search for grubs. (I no longer blame trespassers for these excavations.) A tuft of coarse black fur is still snagged on the corner of my deck where somebody besides me likes to scratch.

This yearling was feeding in the blackberry thicket. Blackberries are nutritious and taste good, a rare combination in most restaurants. I'm not suggesting that bears are gourmands; they'll eat anything, including boiled Brussels sprouts.

Blackberries need bears and other wildlife to eat them, so they figured out how to keep their fruit free of thorns. This was not an act of culinary kindness. They want customers to help themselves and then drop their indigestible seeds far and wide. Humans, generally, no longer hold up our end of this bargain.

Bears appear to be impervious to blackberry thorns. Since I am not impervious, I always let them barge through the thickets first.

Wildlife tends to flee when surprised, though sometimes they'll attack if they feel threatened or cornered.

Barging through is not a survival instinct. It's what big galumps do, because they're big galumps. Sometimes it's useful, and sometimes not.

Cattle, for example, try to barge through a small-but-enticing opening when they find themselves trapped in a chute for the purpose of being vaccinated, wormed, ear-tagged with fly repellent and otherwise doctored for their own good.

This halfback tendency to hit the open hole is their downfall.

Like most cattle farmers working alone, I use an automatic, self-catching headgate at the end of my chute. I position its two heavy steel doors half open and facing inward toward the animal. When a steer tries to barge through, it closes and locks the doors on itself.

This "catch" probably hurts them a little. The biggest steers always carry on more than the smaller ones, "squawling and belling." I've yet to hear a single moo. I remind each steer to "settle down and take it like a man," which it once was.

Cattle remember discomfort. The second time through the headgate brings out stubborn opposition. The third time gets a little wild -- some try to climb out of the chute; others -- if they're small enough -- succeed in turning themselves around so that their rumps face forward.

One or two slim Einsteins in every herd figure out that if they stick just their heads between the inward-facing doors and waggle around just right they can spring the catch...and waltz through. It also helps if I haven't set the catch just right.

Barging through is the wrong strategy when you're trapped in a chute facing a headgate.

The trick is to use your head first and then get all your parts shimmying together in the right way. One side of your body can't refuse to cooperate with the other and vice versa. Nor can an unhappy part choose that moment to secede.

The head has to synchronize the right haunch with the left haunch, neither of which can be wasting time calling each other butts...or traitors.

Bears, unlike cattle, are not domesticated. They get to barge through life. We are more like cattle, for better or worse. We don't get to do whatever we want, whenever we want. Occasions arise when we need to get doctored for our own good.

I'm afraid that you can't inject much cure using a syringe without a needle. (I also oppose thornless blackberries on principle.)

We have entered a chillier season. Squawling and bellowing provide false warmth.

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