

Natural Life of the Lost Coast

The hidden lives of black bears

By Kim A. Cabrera

The tree looked like a bullet had grazed its bark, leaving behind a furrow through the cambium layer. Pieces of bark had been ripped off, showing claw and tooth marks underneath. This sign was located at a height of seven feet off the ground. Only one animal creates marks like that on trees in this area. Fur snagged in the bark confirmed that identification — black bear. I found this marking tree in the forest not far from Redway.

Bears have many ways of communicating with others of their species. Being large animals that can roam huge territories, bears need a way to find each other in mating season, as well as mark their territories to keep out trespassers and prevent fights. Marking trees are one way of doing this. A bear will rub its back on the tree, transferring fur and scent to the tree. The bear might also bite or scratch the bark, up to the highest point it can reach. In the absence of trees, phone and electric poles are marked. Marking trees are usually located near bedding and feeding areas. This one happened to be located close to the bear's winter den.

Black bears hibernate in regions that have more severe climates, usually places with lots of snow in winter. In our area, bears may be active at any time of year. I have found their tracks in all months of the year, including mid-winter. In some areas, such as desert climates, black bears do not hibernate at all. As long as there is food available, bears can survive without hibernating.

The den used by this particular bear was a very simple one. It consisted of a large pile of redwood bark that the bear had obtained by scraping it off several nearby trees. In a triangle cre-



PHOTOS BY KIM A. CABRERA

This tree shows where a bear has sharpened its claws.

ated by a log and a cluster of redwoods, the bear had gathered a mattress of shredded bark. The bear curled up on this, making a shallow depression in the center in the shape of its body. Aboveground dens like this are not uncommon, even in snowy regions. Bears pack on plenty of weight in the fall and have thick fur that provides good insulation to help them survive the cold months. In this case, redwood bark provided insulation from the ground.

Black bear cubs are usually born at the end of January. At birth, each cub weighs as much as a single stick of butter. They grow quickly, nursing on their mother's milk, which is rich in fat. One or two is the usual litter size, but there have been larger litters.

A female bear will have a smaller territory than a male bear. Females defend their ter-

ritories against other females. They need access to high-quality foods to feed their growing cubs. Male bears roam larger territories, often overlapping those of several females.

When the cubs are 1.5 to 2 years old, they are old enough to venture out on their own. Thus, the cycle of life begins anew.

Kim A. Cabrera has been tracking animals for over 30 years and has an educational background in natural resources planning and interpretation. Kim's track drawings have been included in several books. Cabrera is a charter member of the International Society of Professional Trackers. Cabrera is a Tracker II level search and rescue tracker.

This article is part of a series about natural life on the Lost Coast, sponsored by the Lost Coast Interpretive Association, which may be contacted at lostcoastintassoc@gmail.com.