

June 14, 2006

**Cherokee National Forest
Benton Falls Incident
Media Fact Sheet**

Dr. Stephen Herrero, bear researcher at the University of Calgary and author of the book “Bear Attacks: Their Cause and Avoidance”, has provided some information about bear behavior based on information surrounding the Benton Falls incident. Dr. Herrero has shared his belief that this attack was predatory in nature. The criteria that lead to this conclusion are:

- Occurrence during the daytime and very early in the season, when black bears are emerging from their winter dens and natural food sources are scarce.
- Involvement of a young adult male bear, probably dispersing into less than optimal pine habitat.
- Persistence and duration of the attack.
- Lack of food items carried by the victims or witnesses.
- No evidence of prior capture and experience with humans. (Food-conditioned bears rarely exhibit predatory behavior.)
- Focus on the smallest victims.

Predaceous acts are extremely rare.

These types of black bear attacks are extremely rare, impossible to predict, and are difficult to prevent. Approximately one million black bears reside in North America, and yet they rarely kill a person. One to two such human fatalities occur each year.

Visits to natural areas carry some inherent risk.

There is always a risk of injury or death when encountering wild animals, including black bears. Behavior of wild animals is unpredictable. Treat all bear encounters with extreme caution.

The Southern Appalachian black bear population, and adjacent human populations, have increased dramatically, increasing the odds of encounters.

More black bears are legally hunted each year than bear experts knew existed 30 years ago. In Tennessee, the black bear “harvest”, which probably represents 10-20% of the total bear population, has increased by 40-50 bears every 5 years since 1970. About 1,500 bears currently live in the Cherokee National Forest.

Visitors who encounter bears can minimize risk by following safety tips.

People can reduce their risk of rare attacks by learning more about black bears, their behavior and their seasonal habitat use.

Visitors to black bear country should be alert for bears; never approach, surround, corner or feed a bear.

Try to not surprise bears at close range. If your presence causes a bear to change its behavior, you are too close. Aggressive behaviors (running towards you, making loud noises, swatting the ground) are indicators that the bear is stressed and wants more space. Increase your distance by backing away, watching the bear and giving it space.

If a black bear approaches or follows you, try changing your direction. If the animal continues to approach, stand your ground. Group together and intimidate the bear by shouting and acting aggressively. Make yourself look as large as possible, for example, move to higher ground. If you have a deterrent, use it. If a black bear attacks, fight back with anything available.

Visitors can minimize the chance of having an unsafe encounter with a food-conditioned black bear.

Separate cooking and sleeping areas of your camp when possible. Never store food or scented items in a tent. Always store food and trash in a manner that makes it unavailable to wildlife.

Most human-black bear encounters are positive experiences.

Black bears are highly evolved creatures found in many forested areas. Each year millions of people enjoy seeing them or knowing they are part of the forest. Distant sightings of a bear playing with its cubs or feeding on berries are some of the most unique, rewarding, and memorable experiences to be had in Southern Appalachian wild areas.