

Canada**If you go down to the woods...**

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And bears do not just picnic on honey

THIS has been a horrific summer for bear attacks in Canada. Earlier this month, a 52-year-old fisherman on Vancouver Island was badly mauled after a black bear swam over to his boat, scrambled on board and began attacking him, refusing to let go—despite being repeatedly struck with a gaff, beaten with a hammer and stabbed with various sharp objects—until a rescuer finally managed to slit its throat with a filleting knife.

Last month, a woman trimming bushes in her garden in a Vancouver suburb was likewise severely clawed and bitten. In May, Brent Case, a 53-year-old surveyor, was taking pictures of a coastal river 700km (430 miles) north of Vancouver when a grizzly bear seized him from behind. The bear bit both his arms before gnawing on the back of his head, “eating my brains”, says Mr Case, who survived by playing dead. The same month an elderly woman fishing in western Quebec was killed by a black bear before being dragged back into the woods.

Such stories have inevitably grabbed the headlines. Increased sightings of bears near homes have also fuelled public fears. But, in fact, bear attacks are exceedingly rare and fatal ones even more so. Although exact figures are hard to come by, Stephen Herrero, a bear expert at the University of Calgary, reckons that there have been only 13 attacks by black bears resulting in injury (including one death) in the whole of North America this year. Grizzlies have carried out a further 11 attacks, resulting in no deaths. Neither species has averaged more than two kills a year since the 1950s.

With an estimated 70,000 grizzlies and 900,000 black bears sharing the continent with 440m people, that puts bear attacks well below bee stings, lightning bolts, spider bites and dogs as threats to human life, not to mention more familiar killers in the form of alcohol, cars and drugs. Yet few of these excite anything like the same media interest as tales of fierce fanged and clawed woolly predators springing from the woods in a snarling fury.

All the lurid publicity has had one beneficial side-effect, however. Since it is invariably accompanied by advice on what to do when you meet a bear, it is at least helping to reduce the number of deaths. Climbing trees or running is not advised as bears are better at both than humans. Playing dead, as Mr Case did, sometimes works, but not if a hungry bear sees you as food. Attacks, though still relatively rare, are rising as people penetrate further into bear country, either for recreational purposes using all-terrain vehicles and mountain bikes, or in helicopters and bush planes in search of timber and minerals.

It is a trend that has reached the Arctic. This month the national parks service started training Inuit in Nunavut to help researchers, geologists and tourists avoid close encounters of the polar-bear kind.