



# BEARGLARY IN PROGRESS

*Written by NYS ENCON Police Lt. Matthew Clemens*

**LITTLE DID WE KNOW** that 2018 would be a record year for black bear calls in northern New York. It all started on May 12th when New York Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) Keith Kelly received a voicemail from a resident in Hamilton County. It was one of the first calls of the season regarding black bear activity. The caller reported a sow and two cubs hanging around his chickens and pigs, and fortunately the bears had not caused any problems.

Over the next couple of weeks in May there was a spike in nuisance bear calls throughout the Adirondacks and at the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains. Nothing out of the ordinary for the local ECOs though. Bird feeders and garbage inadvertently left out - the typical calls that are handled each year by wildlife staff and Officers. The calls didn't let up though and became regular. On June 1st, a call from a resident of Hamilton County that had dispatched a bear breaking into his chicken coop. A few days later a second bear dispatched by another resident, again entering a chicken coop. Reports then surfaced of an ear-tagged bear coming onto porches regularly in the northern part of Hamilton County, seemingly unafraid of people and difficult to frighten off (ear tags indicate the bear has already been trapped by wildlife staff normally be-



cause of previous undesired behavior).

Due to weather conditions the natural mast crop was almost non-existent in many areas. Because of this we had a suspicion that bears would be more active searching for food, but this hunch became a realization as more calls came in. The Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) wildlife staff in Ray Brook started to send regular updates for our area. Every report seemed to have the same details - large bears, bird feeders, garbage, reluctant to leave. Reports of bears, with and without ear-tags, were becoming more common including reports of these bears breaking into dwellings and hanging around summer camps. On June 23rd, ECOs Keith Kelly and Nathan Favreau had euthanized a bear that had broken

into a dining hall at the Raquette Lake Girls Camp and chased off a second bear in the same area. By this time, ECOs were working long days and nights trying to stay current with the uptick in activity. Multiple culvert traps had been deployed throughout Hamilton County and surrounding areas to capture these bears. Break-ins of numerous occupied dwellings in Hamilton County continued to be reported with a number of ear-tagged bears being confirmed by homeowners.

As July progressed we were hoping the natural food sources would blossom and curb some of the bear activity. Resources and staffing began to get prioritized on the more serious issues - Class one bears that had entered occupied dwellings in search of food, and most of the time were successful in obtaining a food reward. Culvert traps continued to be re-deployed at strategic locations with ECOs constantly checking them and conducting patrols around the clock. To complicate things, we received a few calls on July 26th of presumed bear break-ins on the north east side of Raquette Lake near Bluff, a location accessible only by boat. As with all the bears euthanized up to this point these new reports were no different. Large bear entering an occupied dwelling during the late evening and early



morning hours – some, going straight to the refrigerator for a snack. These new locations were just a little more remote and required some preparation. A few homeowners even reported waking up to noises in the kitchen and were surprised to find a bear already inside the house. Fortunately, in all of these instances the bears retreated through the windows when confronted without further incident. ECOs and wildlife staff deployed snares and a light-weight culvert trap, but the efforts proved unsuccessful. Two of the snares had been fired, but then the sightings slowed down. By the end of July, eleven bears had been euthanized by Wildlife Staff and ECOs, with three more bears being euthanized by residents after attempting to kill livestock. Most of these eleven bears averaged in the 250-lb range, with a few topping the scales of 350-400 pounds. Not the type of year any of us desired.

By August, the hours and patrols focused on these bears were incredible. The first half of August continued as if it was still July. Hamilton County was the epicenter of Class one bear activity, with a few other reports of similar bear issues in adjoining counties. The bears had

been forced to increase their range and boldness around people and structures just to find food. Around mid-August, Blue-Yellow made her appearance and changed our plans entirely.

On the southern portion of Raquette Lake in Hamilton County is Golden Beach Campground which is not that far from where the remote patrols were taking place near Bluff Point. With a busy camping season there had been a few scattered reports of bears within the campground searching coolers and unsecured items for food. On August 17th

we assigned ECOs to focus on the area after recent sightings of a double-ear tagged bear inside the Campground; one yellow in color and the other tag a shade of green or blue. With the unsuccessful efforts of trapping a bear on the remote points of Raquette Lake we knew this was likely the bear causing problems based on reports, and this bear seemed to be increasingly bold as each day passed.

Things got quiet for a few days with no reported activity, and we scaled back our detail. The night of August 21st however, ECO Favreau received a report from dispatch of a bear active at a campsite in the Saranac Islands Campground in Franklin County, to the north. ECO Favreau responded to the remote campsite by boat and made contact with the

bear who was still rummaging around the campsite and camper's belongings. After hazing the bear with rubber buckshot proved unsuccessful, the bear was euthanized and transported back to shore by boat, not an easy task at night. Whenever we had a small break in activity from Hamilton County it seemed another serious incident would pop up in the surrounding area. With no new information from Blue-Yellow, ECOs continued following up with local residents for any possible sightings and checking game cameras for activity. Looking back now there was an uptick



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in Blue-Yellow going on porches, breaking into unoccupied camps and damaging the residences while obtaining food rewards when we thought things were quiet. The problem was that the reports were not coming in right away – residents were out of town and returning to these remote camps only to find a mess days after it had occurred.

In the early morning hours on August 25th ECO Favreau responded to a bear inside a residence on Poplar Point of Raquette Lake – upon arrival the bear was gone, but it was the same scenario as the other reports and seemed likely that it was Blue-Yellow. The location was just west of Golden Beach Campground, and the scenario seemed very similar to the Bluff Point reports. Wildlife staff re-deployed a culvert trap on Poplar point which remained untouched and ECO Kelly set game cameras in the area. Shortly thereafter we had pictures and confirmed a double-ear tagged bear was in the area, although we couldn't distinguish the color or numbers of the ear tags. Given the amount of reports we flooded the area with ECOs focusing on patrols from midnight to 0500 hours, which encompassed the time of our recent sightings.

The next evening on one of those patrols, ECO James Cranker had a bear treed nearby but no ear tags. Without confirmation this bear had done anything wrong, we continued with patrolling for Blue-Yellow. Another night gone by and another response to the Campground for a bear that was gone on arrival. The bear was still elusive, mak-

ing sure to keep distance from the traps and quickly departing the area after it was confronted.

Waking up on the morning of August 28th my phone had an e-mail from another local ECO, Scott Pierce... "Bear in Trap!" Finally! Until the message revealed it was a 150 pound bear without any ear tags. It fit the description of a few other break-ins to structures in the area though. Reviewing all of the reports and the location again, the decision was made by Law Enforcement and wildlife to euthanize the bear. Later that morning, more reports from the past few nights of break-ins minutes from where ECOs were stationed and actively patrolling, accompanied by video and pictures confirming Blue-Yellow was still active and in the area. Resources and staffing increased. The latest report had Blue-Yellow entering structures and going straight to the refrigerator, with one instance of the bear likely spending a good amount of time inside a camp and urinating in the house. During that specific incident the bear emptied the refrigerator, drank a bottle of maple syrup, consumed a four-pound bag of sugar and wandered around the house scratching various objects before topping the excursion with some cough drops.

The morning of August 31st, ECO Kelly called me. Our detail had shifted focus to Long Point on Raquette Lake. Just north of the campground – another location accessible only by boat. ECO Kelly had fresh tracks not far from a camp they were patrolling near that

morning. It was the third time this bear had been back to this camp, either in the late evening or around dawn. After discussing some other reports and the recent information, there were five ECOs and two boats scheduled on scene starting in the early evening, and lasting into the early morning hours the following day. ECO Kelly strategically placed the other Officer's (Pierce, Favreau, Riggs, Cranker) around the area. It seemed we might have finally caught up to Blue-Yellow, but none of us were certain. This bear had us all thinking ahead and re-evaluating each day, especially when more reports form the public trickled in. At about 2300 hrs on the 31st, a message sounds on the phone – a picture of Blue-Yellow euthanized near a camp. A sense of relief for all of us, given how active the bear had been lately.

Blue-Yellow was likely responsible for over a dozen break-ins in the area. While confirming those is difficult, the situations and events all contained similarities. When euthanized, she was nine years old and weighed approximately 200 pounds. She had originally been captured in 2016 with two cubs at Golden Beach Campground. She weighed approximately 140 pounds and a tooth was collected by DEC wildlife staff which confirmed she was born in 2009. Around that same time there were reports of a sow with cubs breaking into structures in the area, but it was never confirmed that Blue-Yellow was the culprit in 2016. She received her Blue and Yellow ear tags in 2016 and was relocated 45-50 air miles northeast of Raquette Lake in a remote location. No reports or sightings of Blue-Yellow occurred in 2017, but when she returned to the Raquette Lake area in 2018 she was positively identified by a few citizens.

For New York's Region 5 Environmental Conservation Officers, this year will unfortunately be one remembered in regards to black bear activity. By mid-September, Region 5 had fielded some 478 nuisance black bear related calls, setting a record for the Region and leading the entire State. Of those calls, sixteen class one bears were euthanized by ECOs and Wildlife Staff and another four bears euthanized by homeowners. ☹