

*“D Boon kilt a bar.”*

— *Attributed to Daniel Boone*

There is a cave along the Yadkin River, near Salisbury, that has an inscription saying “D Boon kilt a bar” (or similar wording – I’ve seen it but it was many years ago). There is also a tree in Tennessee that says the same thing: “D. Boon cilled a bar in year 1760”. A little internet research reveals countless other bear-killing inscriptions attributed to North Carolina’s most famous pioneer scattered across North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. It reminds me of how just about every parish in Louisiana claims to have the burial spot of the pirate Jean Lafitte.<sup>1</sup> Did Daniel Boone really kill all of those bears? If he did, maybe we need to dig him up and put him back to work, because the bruin population is recovering and our bee hives are on the menu.

I grew up in Guilford County and now live in northern Orange County. All of my life I’ve been entertained by the rare story of a black bear being sighted in someone’s backyard in the springtime. Those were always young males going into their second year of life. They were from the mountains (the Virginia mountains are just a short trek to the northwest of us). Mama bear lets the male cubs hang around for a year but runs them off the next spring so she can devote all of her attention to her new litter of cubs. Without a home, the young males wander down the river beds in search of new territory. They come southeast down the Dan, Flat, Haw, Eno and other rivers, following them just like the earliest Americans did hundreds of years ago. These bears are the ones who find themselves as strangers in a strange land, often falling victim to trucks on the interstate.

A NC Wildlife Resources Commission flyer echoed this observation as recently as 2008,



Theoretical bears became real when this one (circled in red) sauntered across the author's Orange County driveway in May. Apologies to Ansel Adams for not getting a better photo in the excitement of the moment! Photo: the author

saying, “Bears are very common in the Mountain and Coastal regions of North Carolina but rarely live in the heavily populated Piedmont.”<sup>2</sup> But just a few years later, the same agency reported, “Thanks to science-based management and bear sanctuaries, black bears have made a remarkable recovery in population and range. Black bear expansion has occurred naturally as bears have moved into suitable habitats. As of 2012, there were approximately 17,000 bears in the state, occupying 61% of the state’s total land area.”<sup>3</sup>

This expansion is evidenced by the number of black bears that have been “harvested” by hunters in recent years.<sup>4</sup> In the entire Piedmont, that number has increased from 20 in 2014 to 88 in 2023. The 2023 tally included one in Orange County, 9 in Caswell, 9 in Granville and 12 in Person. Significantly, the number of female bears has gone from 20% of the Piedmont harvest in 2014 to 41% in 2023, indicating that it isn’t just young, transient males who are living here now.

<sup>1</sup> North Carolinians know better. Jean Lafitte changed his name and, with a chest of gold, retired to a quiet life in Lincolnton, NC. He is buried under the name “Lorenzo Ferrer” in St. Luke’s Episcopal Church Cemetery. See <https://www.stlukeslincolnton.com/about-1>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.orangecountync.gov/DocumentCenter/View/868/Black-Bears-PDF>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncwildlife.org/media/1403/open>

<sup>4</sup> NCWRC Harvest Statistics <https://www.ncwildlife.org/hunting/harvest-statistics#ByRegion-1164>



Was this tornado damage? Nope, a bear found a tasty snack in this apiary. As is typical, it was an obnoxious dinner guest, strewing hive parts over a wide area. Photo: Lewis Cauble

### Now what?

The 2023 Piedmont harvest of 88 bears compares with 2,696 in the Coast and 1,497 in the Mountains. A cynic may say that 88 bears isn't much more than the number of Bengal tigers that were harvested in the Piedmont in the same year. So it may be premature to start worrying about black bears devouring our hives in the same way that our neighbors to the east and west do. But the trend of their habitat overlapping with ours is likely going to continue to escalate. Resident bears will wander over an area 5,000 to 50,000 acres (roughly 8 to 78 square miles) so even a single bear could visit quite a few apiaries. (For comparison, Umstead Park is 5,599 acres, nearly 9 square miles.)

Bears not only love to snack on bees' brood and food, they are extremely clever about it. Electric fencing is no guarantee of safety in and of itself. Beekeepers in the mountains tell me they've seen bears climb trees adjacent to fenced hives, shimmy across an overhanging branch and drop into the enclosed area. Bears are reported to drag large logs a considerable distance and throw them across an electric fence, creating a safe pathway. Experienced beekeepers advise putting the electric fence charger inside, not outside, the fenced enclosure or clever bears will simply destroy it. And once a bear finds that an apiary is a good



A close-up shot shows the complete disregard bears have for frames, comb and boxes. Photo: Lewis Cauble

option for a meal, it will be back time and time again.

### When the time comes...

With the question being when, not if, black bears will repopulate our area in noticeable numbers, I asked the NCDA&CS Apiary Inspector for the Mountain Region, Lewis Cauble, for advice on how to deal with them. He has personal experience in the matter -- a bear destroyed four out of 12 hives in one of his outyards a few years ago. He said, "Bears hate electricity. A decent fence that is installed well and properly maintained will get you where you need to go."

That advice is echoed by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. They've got a [webpage](#) dedicated to bears and beekeepers and an [in-depth guide](#) to selecting, constructing and maintaining an effective anti-bear fence around an apiary. They say, "Solar-charged or 110 volt electric fencing is one of the most effective methods to reduce black bear damage. An electric fence must be well grounded, sufficiently charged at all times, and maintained on a regular basis." The guide has detailed instructions for setting up a variety of fence types depending on the needs of the beekeeper.

Note the emphasis on "installed well" and "properly maintained." The installation and maintenance must both be done in a bear-



smart manner. This is exhaustively explained in the NC WRC material. Neglect of either one of those points will result in failure.

**Meanwhile...**

Is it time to worry about bear damage in the Central Piedmont? My bee school students know that my foundational beekeeping philosophy is that we shouldn't worry about any of this stuff – that takes the fun out of it. Maybe the better way to phrase the question is, is it time to begin protecting our apiaries against bear damage? Everyone's situation is different and will dictate the answer. Even Apiary Inspector Cauble says, "I do not have a fence around the bees at my house yet. We live on a busy road and have a dog. No issues so far."

For me, I'll wait until bear-ravaging of hives becomes common in my end of the county before going to the electric fence store. But I will follow Apiary Inspector Cauble's advice when he said, "I had zero fence knowledge before the [bear damage] incident so it was a bit overwhelming to have to hit the ground running. I would encourage folks to try to study up on the concepts in order to have a base knowledge before having to jump in after an attack."



**Apiary Inspector Cauble's bear fence. It may not look pretty but it is properly constructed for its purpose, properly maintained and it works exactly as intended.**

**Photo: Lewis Cauble**

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**The expanding range of the black bear in North Carolina from 1971 to 2010**

Source: North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

(Although out of date, this graphic illustrates how rapidly black bear territory is expanding in NC.)

