

International Bear News



Tri-Annual Newsletter of the
International Association for
Bear Research and Management (IBA)
and the IUCN/SSC Bear Specialist Group

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Karelain Bear Dogs hazing an American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) off-leash following the bear's capture in a human-bear conflict situation. Photo credit: JT Humphrey *AKAWolf.com*. See page 28-29 for more on using Karelain Bear Dogs for black bear management.

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Editorial Policy

International Bear News welcomes articles about biology, conservation, and management of the world's eight bear species. Submissions of about 750 words are preferred, and photos, drawings, and charts are appreciated. Submissions to regional correspondents by email are preferred; otherwise, mail or fax to the address above. IBA reserves the right to accept, reject, and edit submissions.



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Consult website for submission guidelines. Deadline for the Spring 2020 issue is 05 February 2020.



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The use of the IBA-BCF logo at the beginning of an article signifies work that was supported, at least in part, by the Bear Conservation Fund through an IBA grant.

A Close Interaction Between a Brown Bear and a Wolf in the Central Apennines (Italy)

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The benefits of 'play behavior' are still not entirely understood. In some cases, because the role of play is not evident and may be performed at great cost to animals, play might be a side product of other beneficial processes that counteract the costs of play (Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010). For example, play may increase behavioral variability and help tune adaptive behavioral flexibility, and short-term neuromuscular, neuroendocrine, and immunological improvements may result from play, helping individuals that are still immature to counteract the effects of stress (Fagen and Fagen 2009). Moreover, the energetic cost of play is irrelevant if feeding is adequate or if it favors the development of other skills (Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010). For example, the social role of playing (i.e., play behavior among conspecifics) may be related to greater group cohesion (Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010). However, play behaviors are rarely observed between two different species and, especially, between different species of large carnivores that have potentially harmful weapons (teeth and claws).

Here, we describe a 22-minute-long close interaction between a brown bear (*Ursus arctos marsicanus*) (probably a sub-adult, <4-year-old, female) and a wolf (*Canis lupus*) in the Natural Regional WWF Reserve "Gole del Sagittario" in the Central Apennines (Abruzzo Region, Italy), which occurred on the 3rd of April, 2016, around noon time.

Both the bear and the wolf appeared almost at the same time (11:24 AM) on a mountain slope partially covered by patches of beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) forest at ca. 1650 m a.s.l. The wolf was following the brown bear, which was walking towards one of the patches of snow still present among the beeches. Apparently, the snow was the element that attracted the attention of the bear. Actually, a survey done the day after did not reveal any carrion in the vicinity of the interaction area. As soon as the bear reached the snow patch, the wolf sat close to it (picture 1) and remained observing the bear which started to do somersaults and slide on the snow (11:35 AM; pictures 2–4).



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Until 11:42 AM the bear continued to run, slide and frolic in the snow apparently ignoring the close presence of the wolf, whereas the wolf (11:41 AM) stood up and started to run around the bear less than 10m from it, both when the bear was somersaulting and when it was going up the snow-covered slope to start somersaulting and sliding down again (five times at least; pictures 5–8). The half tail tuck along with a partially arched back seemed to indicate that the wolf was humbling itself and might have represented a form of submission (Harrington and Asa 2003).



After lying close to the bear (picture 9), the wolf displayed a 'playing' posture to the bear (picture 10) and, then, it started to move closer to it (picture 11). The bear did not show any reaction towards the wolf. When walking closer to the bear, the wolf clearly showed a fully tucked tail along with an arched back, which should be considered another form of submission (picture 12; 11:43 AM).





In fact, when the bear stood up, the wolf ran away with a fully tucked tail (picture 13), a body position that may indicate that the wolf was running in fear and/or in a submissive manner (Harrington and Asa 2003). Starting at 11:44 AM, and continuing until the end of the interaction (11:46 AM), the wolf remained close to the bear, which was still lying in the snow (picture 14), with the same submissive attitude (picture 15). During this interaction, when the bear stood up and started to slowly approach the wolf (picture 16), the wolf continued to show submission until the bear left. Similar submissive behaviors of wolves, and almost no reactions from bears, had previously been observed in the same area when the species were interacting at carcasses (V. Penteriani, personal observations).



Even if it was not possible to establish the age of the wolf, the brown bear was considered to be a subadult. We might suppose that the observed sequences of play behaviors (picture 2–4, 6, 7, 10) involved juvenile individuals (Pellis et al. 2019), even if play behaviors are not a prerogative of juveniles (Fagen 1981, Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010, Byrne 2014, Pellis et al. 2019). During the juvenile period, several behaviors that are essential in infancy progressively disappear and other ones that are useful in adulthood increasingly emerge. It is in this transitional age that behaviors most likely labeled as play occur (Fagen 1981). However, from this transitional perspective, play might not be a distinct form of behavior, but rather, what appears as play may be a byproduct of the maturation of different behaviors (e.g. fighting, development and evaluation of strength,

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learning of novel environmental information and their possible interactions; Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010, Pellis et al. 2019), which represent an important aspect of both wolf sociality (Harrington and Asa 2003, Essler et al. 2016) and brown bear cognitive development (Fagen and Fagen 2009). Actually, current functional explanations argue that playing allows for the practicing of real-world skills in conditions of relative safety (Byrne 2014) and play allows animals to develop social skills and eases their integration into groups (Sarti Oliveira et al. 2010).

Social interactions are mainly seen and studied between conspecifics, but, for example (Byrne 2014): (a) baboons have been observed teasing cows when they were behind a fence and did not represent a danger for the teaser; and (b) young elephants frequently chase other animals, not just predators that might present some small threat to them, but also harmless species. Teasing is fun for humans because we realize how our 'victims' feel (Reddy and Mireault 2015): does this mean that some species may have cognitive abilities beyond those we attribute to them?

Credit for all photos in this article: Massimo Pellegrini.

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