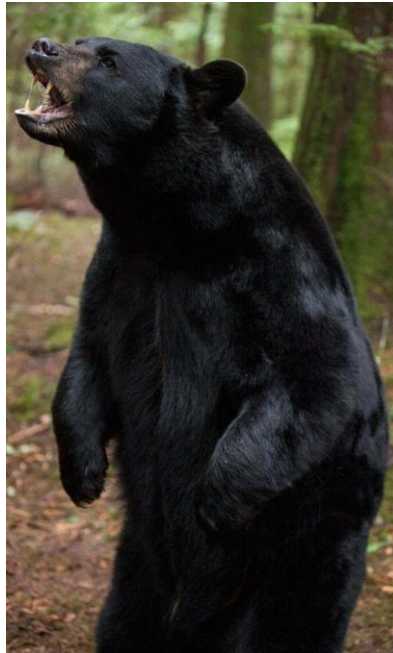


BLACK BEAR ATTACKS IN CANADA AND A REVIEW OF THE FACTORS
INFLUENCING THEM

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
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Major Advisor

Second Reader

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The reader should be aware that opinions and conclusions expressed in this document are those of the student and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the thesis supervisor, the faculty of Lakehead University.

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ABSTRACT

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Canada has experienced numerous black bear attacks over the last several decades. The purpose of this study is to determine if there is an increase in the number of black bear attacks in Canada. Data came from various news sources in each province and the Northwest Territories to gather information about the attacks. The gathered information was then separated into a variety of tables and examined to gain insight on the number of attacks, where they occurred, and the age of the victims. There was a slight increase in the total number of fatal attacks and a larger increase in the number of nonfatal attacks over the last 31 years. Encounters were interpreted to be from both predatory and defensive bears.

Keywords: defensive behaviours, fatal, nonfatal, predatory bears, urbanization, *Ursus americanus*

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) have always posed a threat to human lives, whether it be provoked by humans or a freak accident. However, it is possible that the factors causing bear encounters can be avoided. These factors can include the reduction of bear habitat, human nuisance, and an increase in human population in rural areas (Herrero 2018). Interruptions of bear habitats are the most common and can range from development in forest areas where there is a higher bear population to humans camping and hiking in bear habitats. Forests are being cleared for development where bear populations exist, putting people at risk of encounters (Lewis et al. 2015). An increase in surveys being done of the area where development will happen to see wildlife around the area, as well as any possible habitats being used can lead to a decrease in the number of attacks. Recorded bear-human interactions have led to both near-fatal and less common fatal events.

The black bear is a well-known wildlife species with populations spreading all across North America. Even with their high population in North America, attacks on people are not commonly reported. Over the last several years, however, there have been more reports of bear encounters with humans, ranging from victims being severely injured to their death in extreme cases (Herrero 2018). The past two decades have seen 19 bear attacks reported in Canada with a majority being fatal. These incidents have led to the introduction of more caution signs near areas where bear habitat has been located, as well as in forested areas that are popular for recreational activities (Alongi 2019).

Global human populations are predicted to increase annually by an average of 0.60%, which results in an increase in urbanization to accommodate the growing population (Macrotrends 2021). The recipient of many immigrants, Canada will experience this increase in urban and suburban areas. Bears normally prefer habitats such as dense heavy forested areas, but when food sources such as berry bushes and other small plants fail, bears can enter suburban areas (Lewis et al. 2015). More bear attacks will be a result in the upcoming decades if the information is not provided on why these attacks happen and how they can be avoided (Herrero 2018). This study aims to describe the bear attacks in each of Canada's provinces from reports over the last 30 years and review factors that are causing these encounters. Reviewing these factors will provide knowledge on why these attacks are occurring and why we are seeing an increase in the number of encounters. A set of questions can be asked about what types of bear attacks may have become more common than in the past, and about which factors, such as the existence predatory and defensive bears, and interruptions of bear habitat, might be causing more bear attacks. Solutions, such as more thorough planning of urban development, increased information sharing on how to deal with hostile bears, teaching people about signs of defensive bears, and increased signage in local bear habitats, can lead to a decrease in the annual number of attacks in North America.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Habitat description and life history

Black bears are known to live in a variety of different habitats. These habitats can be deciduous forests, coniferous forests, and they have different degrees of forest coverage. Black bears seek habitat in areas that have the resources they need, such as food, water, and shelter. If any of those resources run out in the area they are currently residing in, black bears will change locations to gain back resources (Dewey and Kronk 2020). Black bears prefer areas with low human populations as humans pose a risk to bears. When close to hibernating, black bears will move to areas that are denser with bushes and trees as they can build a den in preparation for hibernating. Black bears have a very high life expectancy of about 20-30 years, but in the wild most black bears will only live to be around 10 years old. Around 3 years old is when females will reach sexual maturity and will start looking for a mate. Mating is done between June and August and after about 220 days the cubs are born.

Creatures of habit

Bears are creatures of habit, which means they are large mammals that follow a daily routine (Alongi 2019). Black bears are solitary animals that socialize only during a brief mating season. They have large territories, usually between 10-100 km² and resources such as food availability and shelter determine the size of a territory, which a bear will mark with droppings, scratch marks, and urine sprays (Clark et al. 1993). Bears often only stay in the areas they have marked for safety, mating, reliable food source, and keeping their cubs safe. Cubs stay with their mothers for about 16 months before

going their separate ways, with male cubs venturing off further than the females (LeCount 1983). Black bears also use trees that trackers and hunters call “bear trees” to define the perimeter of their range (Clark et al. 1993). Males and females are equally territorial, and confrontations between humans and bears are uncommon unless the land is being encroached upon. If they become territorial, bears will give warnings to intruders to avoid confrontations (Herrero 2018). They will claw, bite, and rub all over the bark and branches of specific trees to warn intruders.

Bear behaviour towards humans

Bear and human interactions are well known throughout history and have continued to be a danger to both bears and humans (Alongi 2019). People are told not to intrude in their territories, and bears will not attack. We are also told that bears are often more scared of us than we are of them (O’Harra 2016). While these sayings can often be true, they do have their downfalls. Where black bear populations are increasing, they have been known to move into more populated areas like suburbs to seek shelter, as well as to scavenge food (Lewis et al. 2015). They have become more of a nuisance, if not an absolute danger (Alongi 2019). Some areas have seen issues with black bears that seem to have lost their fear and apprehension around humans. Where increased interactions occur between humans and bears, the topic is more frequently studied to protect both populations and to avoid a major management challenge for wildlife agencies. Trends in voluntary reports of attacks are commonly assumed to reflect actual trends in human-bear interactions, recent research suggests, and bias is influenced by attitudes toward the species and its management (Wilbur et al. 2018). Some items included in typical reports

of bear attacks are a description of the attack, the age and gender of the victim, and an assessment of whether the bear was acting in a predatory or defensive way.

Bears in residential areas

Bears in residential areas are commonly reported. Their need to seek shelter and a reliable food source in habitat fragmented by suburban development explains an increase in risk of harmful consequences (Herrero 2018). In Nova Scotia, there has been over the last several years a rise in reported conflicts with black bears (Willms 2021). When bears are exposed to an easily accessible food source it is likely they will keep returning to this area. Over time the bears may become more confident and aggressive with the potential of posing more danger to humans. Black bears are notorious for rummaging through neighborhood garbage, and when people see their garbage torn open or see a bear in the act of eating the garbage and react in certain ways, it can lead to defensive behaviour by the bear (Herrero 2018).

Urbanization in bear habitat

Urban residents experience property damage, economic losses, human injury, or other human-wildlife conflicts when wildlife uses cities (Lewis 2015). Habitat fragmentation due to urbanization exposes wildlife to new stressors, even as slight as creating paths through public use areas such as recreational areas and local parks in cities (Isaksson and Sumasgutner 2016). Even though Canada is amongst the lowest rates by country in deforestation, there are still local cases of deforestation in areas with bear populations (Cole 2021).

One-on-one interactions with bears

Most fatal attacks by black bears during the last century were conducted by lone, male animals that stalked and then killed their human victim (O’Harra 2016). Male bears feel more threatened by humans in their territory, causing them to stalk the human and attack to defend their territory. While a mother bear is protective of her cubs, she will shift more of her focus to protecting the cubs and staying near them to ensure safety.

Predatory versus defensive bears

A bear’s aggressive behaviour may be classified as either predatory or defensive. When there is an attack, officials will investigate the attack to assess whether the bear was showing predatory behaviour or being provoked and acting defensively. Predatory behaviours toward humans can lead to an attack that has a high risk of ending in a fatality (Herrero 2018). Predatory behaviour of bears is defined as a bear having a complete concentration on something or someone, head fully propped up, silent movements, ears erect, and with agitated movements or signs of stress. In contrast, black bears showing defensive behaviours are more often females protecting their cubs (Herrero 1985). When a bear feels threatened by an individual’s presence and it becomes defensive, it creates noise from its jaw and teeth, usually moans and huffs, and sometimes it will even swat the ground in a charging motion (Shaw 2017).

Human recreation levels

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, there has been a surge in the number of people who participate in outdoor activities like walking, hiking, biking, etc.

(Kestenbaum 2021). This increase led to frequent use of trails in areas often occupied by various wildlife populations and had the potential risks associated with the activity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

I designed an investigation of reports of bear attacks in all provinces in Canada between the years 1990-2021. More than 7,000 news articles were accessed, and using 'black bear' and 'attack' as search terms the search was narrowed to 34 articles from 15 news sources across Canada (Table 1). Thunder Bay's Chronicle-Journal newspaper was chosen first, because it gathers articles from all of Canada via Canadian Press; in addition, two other news sources local to each province were chosen to broaden the source material. The analysis started by recording how many encounters were fatal and how many were nonfatal. If attacks had multiple fatalities, they were counted as separate fatalities. If nonfatal attacks had multiple people in the group at the time of the attack only ones who were physically attacked were counted. Victims who had undisclosed ages or gender were left out of the tables used to describe this information. Finally, the interactions were described as completely as possible with respect to the factors that caused them, limited by the extent of reporting (Appendix 1).

RESULTS

While most of the bears that were involved in reported attacks were killed, and while most of the attacks were fatal for the victims, it was difficult to track the factors involved. Most attacks occurred in Ontario with six fatal attacks and eight nonfatal

attacks over the last three decades (Figure 1, Table 2). British Columbia had seven fatal attacks and just one nonfatal attack reported. More fatal attacks and just one nonfatal attack by black bears were reported in western Canada and the Northwest Territories,

Table 1. News sources used to collect data on attacks

Province/Territory	News Sources
Alberta	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - Calgary Herald
British Columbia	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - The Tyee
Manitoba	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - Winnipeg Sun
New Brunswick	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - NB Media Co-op
Newfoundland and Labrador	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - The Telegram
Northwest Territories	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - NNSL Media
Nova Scotia	- The Chronicle Herald
Ontario	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - TBT News
Prince Edward Island	- Guardian
Quebec	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - Le Devoir
Saskatchewan	- CBC News - The Chronicle Journal - Prince Albert Daily Herald
Yukon	- Yukon News

while a similar number of fatal and nonfatal attacks were reported in Manitoba and the eastern provinces. There was an increase in the number of nonfatal attacks over the past three decades (Table 3). The years 2000-2009 saw the most fatal attacks and 2010-2021 saw the most nonfatal attacks. The highest number of reported attacks on males was for victims between the ages of 16-30 years old (Table 4). For attacks on females, there were equal numbers between 16-30 and 31-45 years old.



Figure 1. Map of Canada pinpointing all areas where an attack happened (blue pins represent fatal attacks, and black pins represent nonfatal attacks).

Table 2. Total fatal and nonfatal attacks in the provinces

Province	Fatal attacks	Attacks with minor or severe injuries
Alberta	3	0
British Columbia	7	1
Manitoba	1	2
New Brunswick	0	1
Newfoundland and Labrador	0	1
Northwest Territories	2	0
Nova Scotia	0	0
Ontario	6	8
Prince Edward Island	0	0
Quebec	3	0
Saskatchewan	1	0
Yukon	0	0

Table 3. Total number of fatal and nonfatal attacks over the last three decades

Decade	Total number of fatal attacks	Total number of nonfatal attacks
1990-1999	6	0
2000-2009	9	2
2010-2021	7	11

Table 4. Total number of attacks by gender of victim (identified as males and females) by age groups

Age (years)	0-15	16-30	31-45	46-60	61-75	76+
Male	1	5	3	4	4	1
Female	1	4	4	0	3	0

Description of attacks

While most of the articles included basic information, like what happened at the time of the attack, there were a small number of articles that included other information (Appendix 1). For example, in the attack that occurred in Newfoundland and Labrador, at Happy Valley-Goose Bay, there were four individuals in the group at the time with only one female adult being physically attacked and injured by the bear. The article briefly mentioned the others in the group. Thunder Bay, Ontario saw one attack on July 18, 2014, when a male individual was charged at by a black bear and tackled in his backyard. The man was able to hit the bear to scare it off, and he did not sustain any injuries from the attack. This was the only attack among the news reports in which the victim did not require hospitalization. Among other articles, it was more difficult to determine whether the victim was around other individuals at the time of the attack. There were two attacks on children below the age of 15 years; due to their age, their names were not provided in the reports.

DISCUSSION

Bias

While there is an apparent increase in the number of nonfatal attacks, as reported by Canadian News sources, the real increase could be more or less than what appears, due to various biases. Even though journalists are supposed to refrain from bias, news sources create bias when choosing which articles get published and which do not (Taylor 2019). The different sections of a news source all have an editor who chooses which

articles get published. Once the editor chooses the articles, they then go to the Editor-in-Chief or whoever is in charge of the news source. Articles get published based on their interest and a decision on whether it is something that will catch the public eye. Articles are also differentially published based on what else is happening in the world (Taylor 2019). For example, when COVID-19 was first emerging, the pandemic was the sole topic for almost all news sources. The endless articles and reporting of COVID-19 overshadowed other events that were happening, resulting in some events possibly not getting reported. A final factor is that victims of bear attacks can also deny publication rights to their personal stories if they do not want their information to be public.

More attacks or more reports?

From the collected data there is an increase in the number of attacks each decade over the last 31 years. But there remains the question of whether more attacks are happening, or if there is more news coverage of these attacks. Also, if rates of bear attacks are expanding, is it an effect of expanding urbanization mixed with an effect of increased bear populations, or in some areas is habitat changing to pose a greater risk of physical interaction? With increased outdoor activities during COVID-19, an informal research team found that there were more human-bear interactions, and that there has been for two years a greater risk of encountering a bear (Gates 2021).

Human encounters

Urban areas offer a variety of food sources to bears such as garbage cans, bird feeders, gardens, fruit-bearing trees and bushes, and livestock. Bears do not go into urban areas looking for confrontation with humans. Nearly all bears wander into urban

areas strictly to scavenge food (Merkle et al. 2013). Bears that wander into urban areas pose a risk to humans and may make us aggressive towards them. People may act aggressively to defend themselves and their homes from bears that have wandered into their yards or have caused property damage. When we start acting aggressively toward these bears to scare them off, it causes the bears to act defensively, which can result in physical interaction (Noyce and Garshelis 2010). Finally, black bears will be more aggressive toward humans if they think that we are impeding their habitat.

Lack of signage/information

With some bear attacks happening alongside forest trails, it is natural to ask whether there is enough information for the public to be cautious in areas that may be occupied by bears. Trail signs regarding potential bears in the area are only set in places where there have been bears present in the area or where any markings indicate a bear in the area. Areas that have a history of bears or have had human-bear interactions will often have increased signage to warn the public. A downfall that comes with the signage is that there is no guarantee that the bear(s) will stay in the area where they were once spotted. A bear will only stay in an area if there is a steady supply of food, water, and shelter; if there is not, they will expand their range to find those resources, and signage appears to be out of place (Parks Canada 2017). It is impossible to put warning signs on every trail and every part of a forest where there might be bears, so officials just ask that the public be cautious when out in forested areas and that they have all the equipment and tools to keep safe (Herrero 2018). Websites such as keepbearswild.org track bear sightings and provide information on what to do while in the presence of a bear.

Solutions

While not every article this review stated whether the victim was alone or in a group setting, the articles that did provide information that showed an even split in the number of lone attacks and group attacks. No one can predict when an attack is about to occur, but the knowledge needed to avoid defensive and predatory bears and the proper tools and equipment for self-defence are crucial when traveling in risky areas. The Canadian population will increase every year for some time to come, an increase that will be accompanied by urbanization (Herrero 2018). New solutions to the resulting increased bear attacks include monitoring or surveying areas of urban expansion to determine if black bears are occupying them and having a plan on how to relocate bears. In terms of urban and especially suburban residents, it will be important to learn about protecting homes and property from damage done by bears. Ideas can be simple, like having a fenced yard and locked garbage cans. Pedestrians who use trails or are walking through forested areas can be urged to do so with caution and to look for any signs that bears could be in the area, like foot tracks and possible areas of shelter. If there is an encounter with a bear, people can familiarize themselves with defensive and predatory behaviors. People are also urged to not go alone into forested areas, and carry any equipment needed like bear spray, bear bells, and anything else that can be used to defend against an aggressive bear.

CONCLUSIONS

From the news articles I reviewed, there is some support for an increase in the number of human-bear interactions over the last 30 years, particularly nonfatal attacks. Factors such as bear migration patterns, increasing deforestation and urbanization in Canada, and an acknowledged lack of signage and information might cause the number of problematic human-bear interactions to increase further in the future. Bears wander into urban areas because they were once forested habitats for these animals. The food sources found in urban areas can sometimes influence the bear's decision to habituate to these areas. More surveying needs to be done in forested areas that have the potential to be turned into urban areas, because bears may be inhabiting the forest and it is possible that more will need to be relocated to protect humans.

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Appendix 1. Information on attacks in the provinces

Location of attack	Date of attack	Victim	Fatal/nonfatal	Description of attack
Swan Hills, AB	July 31, 2021	26, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Female worked for a helicopter company - A female was transporting tree planters and was attacked and killed by a female bear - Bear was later tracked and killed by authorities
Fort McMurray, AB	May 7, 2014	36, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suncor worker was attacked at remote North Steepbank Oil Sand Mine site - A female was walking back from the washrooms when attacked by a bear - RCMP later killed the bear
Lesser Slave Lake, AB	May 26, 1991	12, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was dragged and killed from his tent at night at Marten River campground
Mackenzie, BC	May 10, 2015	27, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was killed and eaten by a bear near a campsite fire pit - Bear was killed by

				Conservation Officers
Lilloet (Xaxli'p First Nations), BC	June 2011	72, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was reported missing and remains were found that the bear was eating off - Authorities say the bear entered the house and attacked - 5 suspected bears were killed by Conservation Officers
Panorama Mountain Resort, BC	July 20, 2007	31, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was reported missing after not returning from mountain biking and remains were found nearby a bear - Bear was later killed by RCMP
Fort Nelson, BC	September 1, 2002	31, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was out for a walk behind his trailer at a remote oil rigging site when attacked and killed
Liard River Hot Springs Provincial Park, BC	August 14, 1997	56, male 37, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A female and her 13-year-old son were attacked by a bear on a boardwalk, the female died defending her son

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The male individual was killed after trying to rescue the mother and son in the attack
Tatlayoko Lake, BC	June 14, 1996	53, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was attacked and killed checking fence lines - The male bear had previously been stalking the individual at his house before following him
Mission, BC	October 23, 2017	Age unknown, female	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A black bear broke into a home and bit the homeowner on the back of the leg - The bear exited the house and later a conservation officer came to shoot the bear that had climbed the tree
Selkirk, MB	August 26, 2005	69, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was out picking plums when he was attacked and killed - Bear was later killed by RCMP
Whiteshell, MB	July 21, 2018	8, female	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In South Crosslake located in

				Whitesell Provincial Park 8-year-old female was injured when a bear attacked the tent at a backcountry campsite
Armstrong, MB	2008	Age and gender unknown	Nonfatal Hospital required	- An MNR Biologist from Thunder Bay was attacked while working at a site in Armstrong
New Brunswick	2016	60, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	- The 60-year-old man was sent to the hospital with bite marks from a bear encounter
Newfoundland and Labrador	2019	2 males, 2 females	Nonfatal Hospital required	- 4 individuals were on a canoe trip at Happy Valley-Goose Bay - While sleeping in their tents they were attacked by a bear - One female suffered a leg bite - They were able to scare the bear away and get to an area to call for help
Northwest Territories	June 14, 2005	71, male	Fatal	- At Nonacho Lake a male individual's body was found behind his cabin

				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual's son came the next day to find the body and kill the bear lurking in the area
Northwest Territories	June 3, 2001	18, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual was attacked and killed at a rural campsite
Red Lake, ON	July 20, 2020	67, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The male individual was blueberry picking in the morning - OPP went out and found his remains and found the bear in the vicinity which was shot and killed
Red Pine Island, ON	September 1, 2019	62, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The individual left her cabin to look for her dogs outside - Officers found a bear over her body in the woods - The bear was then shot and killed
Missinaibi Lake Provincial Park, ON	September 6, 2005	30, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A female individual and her husband were attacked by a bear at a remote campsite - The husband suffered serious injuries trying to protect the

				<p>female who was killed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bear was shot and killed by MNR
Cochrane, ON	June 14, 1992	20, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A male individual was attacked and killed while taking soil samples
Algonquin Provincial Park, ON	October 11, 1991	32, male 48, male	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Both men were setting up camp at Bates Island - The bear broke both of their necks and dragged the bodies into the woods to eat them - Police found the remains five days later and shot and killed the bear guarding the remains
Timmins, ON	May 14, 2013	30, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A male individual was found getting attacked by a black bear - The individual was taken to the hospital after part of his scalp had been ripped off and suffered numerous wounds and scratches - Individuals required 356 stitches

Thunder Bay, ON	July 18, 2014	Age unknown, male	Nonfatal No hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The man was attacked in his backyard after a bear charged at him tackling him to the ground - The individual was able to scare the bear off by hitting it
Sandbar Provincial Park, ON	August 7, 2013	42, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A male individual was sitting on a bench table when attacked by a bear - The individual was able to escape to the water until the bear left the area, then sought help
Pukaskwa National Park, ON	August 9, 2011	Unknown age and gender	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A tourist from Michigan was boating and when they went on shore, they were attacked by a bear and suffered many lacerations
Kakabeka Falls, ON	June 22, 2007	20, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Just Southwest of Kakabeka Falls and technician from Thunder Bay went to a job site and when he got out of his truck he was charged at by a bear and was

				able to scare it away
Wabikon Lake, ON	October 6, 2011	24, female	Nonfatal Hospital required	- A Thunder Bay woman suffered injuries when she was attacked by a bear
Kenora, ON	September 29, 2011	Age unknown, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	- A hunter in Kenora was attacked by a bear but was able to kill it with a bow
Kenora, ON	October 1, 2019	69, male	Nonfatal Hospital required	- The male individual was attacked and bit on the thigh and arm and was able to fight back to scare the bear away
La Sarre, QB	May 30, 2008	70, female	Fatal	- The female individual did not return after a solo fishing outing - The husband went out and found the bear dragging her body through the forest
Saint-Zenon-du-Lac-Humqui, QB	September 29, 2002	77, male	Fatal	- Attacked and killed at his campsite in the Gaspé region
Valcartier, QB	July 2, 2000	24, female	Fatal	- The individual was training for biathlon at a military base - Was attacked and killed while training - Bear was trapped and

				killed four days later
Buffalo Narrows, SK	August 20, 2020	44, female	Fatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The individual was on a camping trip with her husband and two kids at McKie Lake- She was using a satellite phone to communicate with her father- She was attacked and killed, and her husband later killed the bear