

## Protection for Radio-collared Bears around Ely

For years, the MN DNR has asked hunters not to shoot radio-collared bears but told them it is legal to do so. This mixed message puts ethical hunters at an unfair disadvantage. Too often, ethical hunters who pass up radio-collared trophies hear them shot at neighboring bait piles. Frustrated, they tell us, “If you don’t want radio-collared bears shot, make it illegal!”

Yet, without public input or meeting with us, Commissioner Tom Landwehr announced that radio-collared bears would continue to be legal game. He stated that our research is not essential to managing the bear population, that making the killing of radio-collared bears illegal would be difficult to enforce because most bears are shot in low light conditions, that the wildlife belongs to all Minnesotans as a public resource, and that the DNR manages populations of animals rather than individuals.

Those reasons raise questions:

*‘The research is not essential to managing bear populations.’*

If the research is not essential to managing bear populations, why is Lynn an invited speaker at two major international conferences on bear management this year? And why does the DNR consider research important only if it is about how bears die? After gathering population statistics for years, we have now moved on to studying how bears live. Using Jane Goodall’s techniques, we now use trust rather than traps and tranquilizers to obtain unprecedented insights into bear behavior and ecology. It takes years before a wild bear will ignore researchers and go about its life, but the results are worth the time invested. However, when a radio-collared bear is killed, we have to start over. Of the 14 bears that we radio-tracked this past year, only two ignored us enough to provide quality close-up data. Two others are coming along. The remainder can be studied only by telemetry and GPS. Veteran study bears like 10-year-old June and 4-year-old Lily are irreplaceable in our lifetimes. The commissioner’s statements about our research were made without him or his staff visiting the research project or the North American Bear Center and without truly knowing what we are learning.

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When the DNR requires deer-hunters to see 3-inch antlers, shouldn’t bear-hunters be able to see the stiff, gaudy day-glo ribbons that stick out from radio-collars? These are visible in dense brush or low-light conditions. When studies show that bear wounding rates run about 12% in northwoods habitat, why does the DNR consider the right of hunters to shoot at poorly defined targets more important than waiting for a clean, well-placed shot—especially during Labor Day Weekend with so many hikers and pets in the woods before leaf-fall. In our small study area around Ely, why not require hunters to look twice and make sure of their target? Most bears are taken over bait where this is easy.

*‘The wildlife belongs to all Minnesotans as a public resource.’*

If that is true, why did broad Minnesota interests take a back seat in this decision when opinion polls showed overwhelming support for protection? An opinion poll in the Duluth News Tribune showed that 9 out of 10 people favor protection. In WCCO-TV’s poll on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 847(93.4%) of 907 people favored protection—that’s 14 out of 15. In the study area, the Ely City Council voted unanimously in favor of

protection, and 68 of 70 Ely business owners signed a petition. The radio-collared bears bring thousands of vacationers to that area.

More importantly, what about the 67 Minnesota classrooms and the thousands of other Minnesotans who follow these radio-collared bears daily via live Den Cams, videos, and research updates? Beyond Minnesota, over 500 classrooms follow these bears nationwide and hundreds of thousands of people who follow them worldwide?

Last but not least, hunters themselves are asking for protection so that bears they spare for research are not killed by other hunters.

Yet, the main reason given for denying protection ignored all of the above. It was that protection would force the few dozen hunters in our small study area to look twice for ribbons in dense brush or low light conditions.

*'The DNR manages populations of animals rather than individuals.'*

True, but studies of individuals provide the knowledge necessary to manage populations. In this study, radio-collared bears must be protected to insure good science, continued education, and benefits to the region.

Commissioner Landwehr suggested we go to the state legislature for protection. We assume he will support that effort or stand aside and let democracy proceed. It is important that Minnesota legislators know how their constituents feel about this issue. Contact information for your state representatives and state senators is at <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/districtfinder.aspx> See more at bear.org.

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