



Seeing black bears up close is experience not to be missed

BY AMY HANCOCK

You can see them lumbering on the shores searching for shellfish and crabs for breakfast beneath the rocks. Insects, berries, nuts, crabs and vegetation are all part of this omnivore's diet.

But what the Vancouver Island black bear is really searching for is wild pacific salmon.

Everyone in Ucluelet will tell you that this time of year is the best time to see black bears. As a heavy run of salmon returns to their natal rivers to spawn, the black bears are gathered with large appetites ready to feast before the winter ahead. When caution is taken, observing these bears truly is an unforgettable experience.

Many wildlife tour operators offer bear-watching cruises in Ucluelet. Some providers will take guests by boat as far as Toquart Bay, scanning the shores along the way looking for the bears. They are usually found on the beach, turning over rocks for food and picking through washed up bull kelp for insects to eat. Lucky tours might witness a bear up in a tree.

When watching bears from the water, viewers are able to get closer without scaring the bears away. They seem unbothered by boats and kayaks and virtually ignore them.

Watching bears via boat or kayak is also popular right in Ucluelet Harbour. Black bears are frequently seen on the east shore of the Ucluelet Harbour from the fish plant near Port Albion, along the shore to Thornton Creek Hatchery, the bear watching hot spot during the salmon spawn.

The Thornton Creek Hatchery is a salmon enhancement project that

Black bear cubs are found near Ucluelet. They are probably looking for food.

Photo by Rosemary Walders



releases hundreds of thousands of salmon into local waterways each spring. The bears arrive at the Thornton Creek Hatchery to take advantage of the returning Chinook that get caught in tidal pools at the mouth of the creek. This highway of super food has drawn the wildlife to the hatchery and the visitors as well.

"We get people from the mainland calling and asking when they should come to see the bears," said Richard Smith, manager of the Thornton Creek Hatchery.

"It is definitely a draw for visitors, especially wildlife photographers."

Thornton Creek is a beautiful sight to behold. The rushing creek cuts through dense coastal temperate rainforest, dew drips off of fern leaves and every bank, tree trunk and fallen log is covered in lush green moss. The waterfall cascades at the head of the creek, creating a truly magical environment.

When watching the bears, visitors will be amazed at the power, speed

and accuracy of their fishing abilities and how they are able to catch their meal and show younger bears the tricks of the trade. Most bears will drag their catch as far as 100 metres from the stream bank to eat it and the can eat up to 15 salmon per day!

"We are building a viewing platform this fall," said Smith. "This will provide a better and safer vantage point for people to come and watch the salmon and the bears."

Smith also said that although bears may appear clumsy and docile, they are still wild animals and are unpredictable, especially when cubs are present. If bothered, or startled, these bears can explode and move very quickly. Please do not approach the bears and make sure you keep a respectable and safe distance. Visitors to the Thornton Creek Hatchery are reminded that they are viewing the bears at their own risk. When observed with respect, black bears are peaceful and incredibly fascinating to watch and even more fun to photograph.

Later this month the Thornton Creek Hatchery will begin to collect eggs from spawning salmon. After the eggs hatch, they will raise the fish over the winter and release them in the spring. Hatchery staff are happy to give free tours of their operations.



A black bear hunts for Pacific salmon.



The face of a black bear, up close. Photo by Rosemary Walders

For more information on the Thornton Creek Hatchery, their salmon enhancement projects, or to make a donation, contact Richard

Smith at 250-726-7566. Please call in advance to book a tour and to ensure staff are on site and available. Happy bear watching!

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