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In The Company Of Bears: What Black Bears Have Taught Me About Intelligence And Intuition



Synopsis

In *In the Company of Bears*, originally published in hardcover as *Out on a Limb*, Ben Kilham invites us into the world he has come to know best: the world of black bears. For decades, Kilham has studied wild black bears in a vast tract of Northern New Hampshire woodlands. At times, he has also taken in orphaned infants—feeding them, walking them through the forest for months to help them decipher their natural world, and eventually reintroducing them back into the wild. Once free, the orphaned bears still regard him as their mother. And one of these bears, now a 17-year-old female, has given him extraordinary access to her daily life, opening a rare window into how she and the wild bears she lives among carry out their daily lives, raise their young, and communicate. Witnessing this world has led to some remarkable discoveries. For years, scientists have considered black bears to be mostly solitary. Kilham's observations, though, reveal the extraordinary interactions wild bears have with each other. They form friendships and alliances; abide by a code of conduct that keeps their world orderly; and when their own food supplies are ample, they even help out other bears in need. Could these cooperative behaviors, he asks, mimic behavior that existed in the animal that became human? In watching bears, do we see our earliest forms of communications unfold? Kilham's dyslexia once barred him from getting an advanced academic degree, securing funding for his research, and publishing his observations in the scientific literature. After being shunned by the traditional scientific community, though, Kilham's unique findings now interest bear researchers worldwide. His techniques even aid scientists working with pandas in China and bears in Russia. Moreover, the observation skills that fueled Kilham's exceptional work turned out to be born of his dyslexia. His ability to think in pictures and decipher systems makes him a unique interpreter of the bear's world. *In the Company of Bears* delivers Kilham's fascinating glimpse at the inner world of bears, and also makes a passionate case for science, and education in general, to open its doors to different ways of learning and researching—doors that could lead to far broader realms of discovery.

Book Information

Paperback: 296 pages

Publisher: Chelsea Green Publishing (September 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1603585877

ISBN-13: 978-1603585873

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.6 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 60 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #284,787 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #39 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Bears](#) #87 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Zoology > Mammals](#) #279 in [Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Wildlife](#)

Customer Reviews

For nearly 20 years, naturalist Kilham has fostered orphaned black bear cubs in northern New Hampshire. In his previous book, *Among the Bears, Raising Orphan Cubs in the Wild* (2002), he described his early efforts to teach cubs to forage, hunt, and avoid natural and human-made dangers. In this book, he recounts years of studying bears he released into the woods, especially Squirty, who has successfully raised her own cubs, who have in turn raised another generation of wild bears. Because Squirty still trusts Kilham as family, he has been able to observe bear social interactions closely. Among his discoveries are that bears socialize far more than commonly believed and occasionally exhibit altruistic behavior. Although some scientists criticize Kilham's work, he defends his methods and likens bear society to that of primitive humans, suggesting that we can learn much about our origins from the bears. Advice for hikers encountering bears rounds out this popular-science memoir. --Rick Roche --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Kirkus Reviews • "The author is a state-sponsored researcher whose work with the black bear population in northern New Hampshire is safe, methodical and sanctioned. Since he does not currently hold a doctorate, he's now working on that • much of his fieldwork has been discounted by the scientific community. On the other hand, his outsider status has allowed him to go his own way and trust in his natural skills rather than bemoan his shortcomings revolving around his dyslexia. Despite his condition, he is blessed with the ability to recognize patterns and see systems where they are not self-evident. The tone of his presentation allays criticism or hostility with its frankness and generosity, as he plunges into what he has observed: how bears use scent and body language, how they compete and cooperate, how they enforce house rules and exhibit a social code of justice and punishment, and how they communicate. Though he has interacted with hundreds of black bears, one in particular • Squirty, whom he adopted as a cub and released into the wild • has allowed Kilham to experience an intimate association with him, from

comfort to anger and many other emotions in between. The author presents a solid case for bears as primal actors of social exchange—cooperation, altruism, morality—and their study, a 'gateway' to understanding 'how surplus fitness and an increase in population density have affected human behavior.' A powerfully original study of bears."Booklist

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Animal behaviorists like Kilham (*Among the Bears*) are at a disadvantage in the world of science: they observe their animals in nature rather than in the lab. Severely dyslexic, Kilham was denied admission to a doctoral program: that, too, made his work suspect. But he's raised 27 orphan bears from infancy and been friends to one bear for 14 years now. Kilham even discovered a sensory organ in black bears that helps them to determine which plants are safe to eat. In straightforward prose, Kilham sets forth what he's learned from more than 20 years of working with bears. They aren't loners, as thought, but inhabit a complicated world of reciprocal social arrangements that allow them to browse other bears' territories when food is scarce in their own. They read mood and intent and discipline bears that transgress. Kilham speculates on the relevance of his observations to early human development and sees bears' behavior as a possible analog to ours.

VERDICT Anyone who enjoys reading works by Temple Grandin (who provides the foreword here), Jane Goodall, or Frans de Waal will enjoy this book. Kilham is a worthy member of a small but increasingly vocal confraternity of scientists who watch as often as they count."Magnificent! In the *Company of Bears* is a brilliant read. Kilham perfectly exemplifies how much the world has to gain from the exceptional insights of dyslexic individuals, who often possess a special talent for finding order hidden in the complex patterns of the real world. We cannot recommend this book highly enough."--Brock and Fernet Eide, authors of *The Dyslexic Advantage*

Kilham's latest is the most thought-provoking book that I've read about bears. It not only made me think differently about

black bears, it also enriched how I feel about them."--Stephen Herrero, biologist and author of *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*"No one knows black bears like Ben Kilham does. During the past decade alone he has raised and rehabilitated to the wild more than 100 orphaned cubs. The social code of the bears, as so delightfully described in *In the Company of Bears*, includes cooperation, imitation, fairness, punishment for infraction, reciprocity, and other traits of this solitary yet highly social species. Human parallels are drawn, too. The charm and core of the book lie in its anecdotes and unique insights, especially of the female Squirty with whom Ben has had a friendship for more than seventeen years. Read this fascinating book and see the bear's world with new eyes."--George Schaller, author of *The Last Panda*; science director, Wildlife Conservation Society"

In the Company of Bears is a brilliant revelation about black bears and a paean to human potential. After decades spent caring for orphan bears and releasing them into the wild, Ben Kilham, a dyslexic animal lover, has now summarized what he has learned about their rich social complexity and humanlike intentionality. The result is to turn a supposedly familiar species into a creature of unsuspected acuity. Part science, part intuition, this enticing natural history is a provocative argument about animal minds, and an intimate celebration of life in the New Hampshire woods."--Richard Wrangham, author of *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made us Human*; co-director of the Kibale Chimpanzee Project

"*In the Company of Bears* by Benjamin Kilham is one of the finest books on the natural history of an animal that I have ever read. As gripping as the best novel, it is very readable and provides great insights into the mind of the black bear and the human. The research that Kilham has done on the behavior of black bears is groundbreaking and will lead us to a much better understanding of the development of intelligence in mammals and the evolution of cognition throughout the animal world."--James R. Spotila, Betz Chair Professor of Environmental Science, Department of Biodiversity, Earth and Environmental Science, Drexel University; author of *Saving Sea Turtles*

"Like Jane Goodall's studies of chimps, Ben Kilham's work with black bears is more than just revealing: it's revolutionary. This riveting book supports two astonishing conclusions: that bears are far more sophisticated than most scientists dared imagine, and that dyslexia, once considered a failing, may simply be another, and often valuable, way of thinking. Ben's work will transform our understanding of how animals live--and how science should be done."--Sy Montgomery, author of *Walking with the Great Apes* and *Search for the Golden Moon Bear*"Ben Kilham's *In the Company of Bears* is surely the most insightful book about animals written in the last 100 years. His observation of black bears is the best ever done, his data is flawless, and these attributes have created a landmark of science that as far as I know has not been equalled with any other species. And if that's not

enough, it's also a page-turner and a must-read. It left me breathless."--Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, author of *The Hidden Life of Dogs* and *The Tribe of Tiger*

Insight into the minds and lives of bears. An in-depth and upfront window into the behavior, character, and needs of these sizeable animals, who are more plentiful among us, and more similar in their wants and needs, than most people would think.

This is Kilham's sequel to his 2002 book *Among the Bears*. Both books are based on observations of New Hampshire black bears which he released into the wild after hand-rearing them from infancy. Rearing included frequent walks in the woods where cubs learned to cope with a wide range of challenges including finding diverse foods and socializing with wild bears. Kilham has continued following some individuals for over a decade, monitoring their interactions with fellow foundlings as well as with bears which have been wild all their lives. In keeping with this book's title, Kilham has positioned himself far out on five limbs by claiming that: (1) Hand rearing bears, mentoring their transition to life in the wilds, and continuing to socialize with them for years thereafter, reveals aspects of their social behavior and cognitive abilities that would not otherwise be detected. (2) The cognitive abilities of bears are roughly on a par with those of apes. (3) Much bear behavior which has conventionally been considered instinctive (e.g., body language) can actually be controlled cognitively. (4) Black bears have a much more sophisticated social system than has been previously recognized. They have "a well-developed system of justice" (p. xx) and reconciliation. "Bears, it turns out, are a lot like humans. They form alliances with strangers, they make calculations about relative costs and benefits, they lay down rules and punish those who break them. They trade based on a clear system of reciprocity. They communicate using equal parts emotion, intention, and dependence on context" "a combination that is essential for communication between strangers and in fact forms the basis for language" (p. xvii). (5) Whereas conventional theories on the evolution of communication posit that signaling will be most complex in highly social species (e.g., wolves or chimpanzees) which have diverse interactions with well-known group members, Kilham posits just the opposite: that cooperating with familiar individuals is much less demanding of communication [diplomatic?] skills than is frequently cooperating with strangers, where the potential for aggression is much higher, as are the costs of misunderstandings. Early humans also had to frequently cope with strangers. So bear social systems might provide critical insights into human social evolution. (Any person who has tried to cope with a foreign culture "human

or animal *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā* can understand this concept.)*ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā* A sub-theme of this book is that some so-called human disabilities (e.g., dyslexia or autism) may in fact remove blockages to uncommon but invaluable abilities such as visualization as precise as computer graphics. Biodiversity is as important mentally as genetically. Kilham *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* field methods are something like a blend of those practiced by Steve Stringham (author of *When Bears Whisper, Do You Listen?* and several other books) and Terry DeBruyn (author of *Walking With Bears*), except that the questions Kilham asks have been more focused on parallels between bears and primates, an issue first raised in the 1970 *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* by pioneering ethologist Gordon Burghardt (Author of *The Genesis of Animal Play* and editor of *The Cognitive Animal*) and by Stringham. Although Kilham *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* second and third limbs were also pioneered by other investigators *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā* e.g., Burghardt, Stringham, and Else Poulsen (author of *Smiling Bears*) *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā* Kilham goes a bit farther out on each limb. He goes much farther out on his fourth limb, based even more on novel interpretation than on novel data. He has the fifth limb pretty much to himself. Even if his ideas on human evolution were the book *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* only topic, it would be well worth reading. One might argue that he clutches at straws to show parallels between bears, apes and humans. But it is sometimes only by clutching that one discovers which straws link to deep truths. Furthermore, there is wealth of information on bear social behavior and communication. His discussions of bear scent marking and vocalizations are the most advanced in print *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā* a valuable addition to the insights shared in his first book. His central theme can be paraphrased as follows: In order to exploit widely scattered food sources, bears form social contracts. If bear A allows B to feed on A *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* turf, B should reciprocate and allow A to feed on B *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* turf. Any bear B that does not allow reciprocity will (a) be punished quickly by any higher ranking bear (A1, A2, *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*) that was denied access, and B will be denied access to the resources of other bears it cheated (A1, A2, *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*). Reciprocal sharing selects for the ability to recognize cheating (unfairness), weigh it, and punish it with an appropriate (i.e., fair) degree of severity. Because bears act as individuals or in small groups of family members or transient companions, conflicts are settled between individuals through ritualized aggression and cooperation, rather than between groups that war with one another, as in chimpanzees. Kilham suggests that humans probably evolved in social systems more like that of black bears than like those of apes -- a suggestion that has no anthropological backing so far as I know. In these and other ways, Kilham *ĀfĀçĀ* *Ā* *Ā*,*çs* book is provocative. Provocation does two things: (1) it urges us to review prior observations, make new ones aimed at verifying points he raised, and rethink conventional interpretations; and (2) it makes us hungry to understand the

methods, observations and logic by which the author justifies discarding conventional thinking. From the perspective of a bear researcher with decades of experience: The strengths of Kilham's methodology are (a) that he has an immense amount of field time in close association with black bears, and (b) that he did not start his research trying to "test" any abstract theory. The weaknesses of his methodology are (a) that early in his research he started grasping for parallels between humans and bears, and (b) when he offers an interpretation of his observations, he does not address alternative interpretations and explain his justification for dismissing them. For instance, why speculate that bears control onset of estrus cognitively, rather than through well-known physiological mechanisms? In some cases this seems to be a consequence of limited knowledge of a large body of relevant scientific literature (e.g., he doesn't cite ANY scientific literature, even that of the pioneering bear researchers listed above). In other cases he is overly defensive in relying on "his" method. This brings to mind the old saying that "If your only tool is a hammer, all problems are nails." Kilham needs to quit defending use of his hammer and master all available tools. Once that happens, he will be better able to cull the chaff from his wheat and produce some truly remarkable research.

This book is a very important part of the growing knowledge that is available about bears. The information is new and this is an in depth look at the lives and behavior of Black Bears from a man who has thoughtfully pursued this knowledge for many years. If you have a library of "bear" books and don't think you need another one, I am sorry, but you do need this one. The work Kilham has done with bears is groundbreaking and the book is well written and concise. It is on my list to read it again.

I love this book. Finding a human being who is in touch with what's right in our world and the need for human growth is awesome. It's time to go back to basics. Cooperation with all that is living is the way. Our present day human systems are not working for all ie: Government, Education, Banking, Health, etc. The Bears have it right. Maybe we need to elect Squirty for President and fill congress with her offspring.

I have not read his first book, and perhaps it has more of what I was really longing for. This book is fascinating--it describes many aspects of bears' lives that he has had rare access to, and I truly admired his experience and insight. At the end of the book, though, I was still hoping for more personal feelings and stories about how he felt as he interacted in this way with wild animals. I was

amazed that he could raise and then be accepted into Yoda's life, for example... and then matter-of-factly note how she was killed by hunters (who knew that she was a research animal and clearly must have just chosen to kill her anyway). I expected him to be heartbroken and angry--and probably he was--but this was not what he wrote about. Perhaps this makes him a better scientist, and the work stands on its own better when there are less personal feelings included. As we live in neighboring Vermont, and we have documentation of three bear cubs, mama bear, and a male bear from just last spring alone, I enjoyed reading about these wonderful animals. I especially liked his advice on how to deal with bear, as I run/walk with the dogs in the morning hours and wonder just where they all are. Read the book. You won't regret it.

This was a Christmas gift from my wife. I have been reading it sporadically since then. What this author has taught me about black bears is amazing. We live in a wooded area of N. Vermont and see bears often. This book is thoughtful, well written and will please anyone interested in wildlife.

A wonderful book: sensitive, yet rigorous scientifically. I learned a lot about the way of bears and corrected several misconceptions from hearsay. Kilham is a remarkable man, and his method of patient and rigorous observation is not only unique but also uniquely effective in discovering the working ways of bears. I highly recommend the book and its predecessor to anyone who has an interest in wildlife.

I loved this book. This man has spent a great deal of time with bears and has an incredible understanding of their behavior. I met Mr. Kilham at the Harris Center and enjoyed his slideshow as well. Everyone who has a bear go through their yard should read this book. I hope he does as well with pandas.

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