

## Babysitter Trees

Story and Photographs by Susan C. Morse



If you were a mother bear with infant offspring, you'd seek wetland edge habitat in early summer. Food is an obvious draw, because wetlands offer a bounty of delectable and digestible forbs, tender grasses, and sedges. Thermal cover with nearby cooling water bodies is also essential--it's hot beneath your still-shedding black winter coat. But most of all, you and your family need cover for security--abundant young trees and shrubs for on-the-ground concealment, and large trees to climb and hide within when danger approaches. Humans, dogs, coyotes, other bears and, historically, wolves and cougars are threats to vulnerable cubs.

"Babysitter trees" serve as reliable daycare centers where cubs can nap safely while mother feeds nearby. Just a year ago, I watched one nervous mother escort her little ones to a huge old white pine. She huffed and snorted a series of vocalizations. Her three cubs obediently scampered squirrel-like up to the topmost branches of the pine, while she slapped and scratched the tree emphatically as if to underscore her instructions, "Get up high in the crown of this tree, and don't come down 'til I come for you!"

Of course, we shouldn't go snooping around remote wildlands looking for babysitter trees, for our intrusion would

defeat their purpose. Trackers should respectfully avoid exploring such sanctuaries at all between March 1<sup>st</sup> and the end of June, lest we spoil the peace and solitude which bears, moose, other mammals, and numerous nesting birds need.

Later in the summer, however, we can find babysitter trees by looking for the largest conifers, especially white pine and hemlock. The thick platy bark of big old conifers makes it easier for cubs to grip the trunk, and the ladder-like spacing of open branches provides excellent climbing and napping structures.



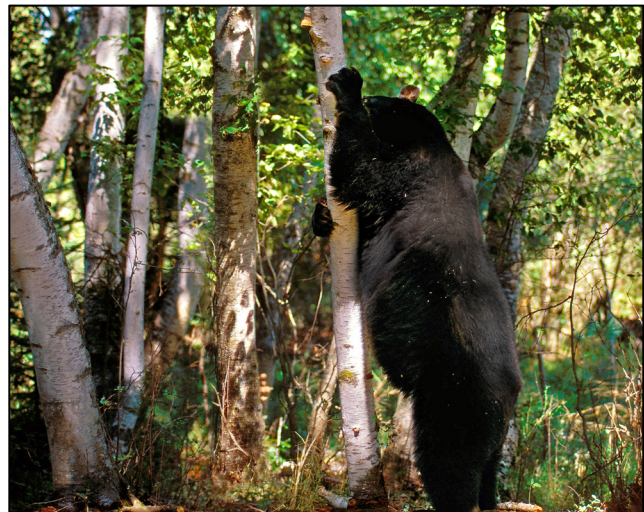
An abundance of evergreen seedlings and saplings in the understory enhances the probability that certain babysitter trees will be more desirable than others. Sometimes the bark of a babysitter tree will be scarred by claw marks, but not always. More often, nearby smaller trees will be bitten, clawed, rubbed, and sometimes broken, as the mother "marks" the tree and its immediate environs. Visual and olfactory messages probably communicate that the area is occupied, thereby minimizing possible conflict and competition with other bears.

We can often find bear hairs still clinging to the exposed sap of bite and claw wounds. Bear scat may also be found at the base of babysitter trees, near where the sow's daybed was located.

In the presence of such grand old trees, sit for a moment and imagine this early summer scene. Picture mother bear and her young family reunited at the base of the tree. She is resting there in its cooling shade, sitting with her back against the tree. Her cubs are purring with contentment as they nurse.



**Contented cub at base of tree**



**Mother bear marking young paper birch in the vicinity of a babysitter tree**



**Black bear hairs attached to bark and exposed sap of nearby red pine mark tree.**



**The ladder-like spacing of open branches provides excellent climbing and napping structures.**