

# MOUNTAINS

## Bodacious Bear to help BearWise team raise funds



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Wood carver John Beaudet still remembers the first time he saw a bear as a kid camping in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“I grew up in East Texas, and for my birthday in the summer, I would ask my parents to go to the Smokies,” he said. “We always went to Smokemont Campground for a few nights right around the middle of July, so I saw my first bear there and fell in love with the Smokies when I was about 10 years old.”

He remembers setting off from Smokemont, following the trails to look for signs of wildlife. It wouldn’t take long to find tracks and scat left by *Ursus americanus*.

“That was in a time when people weren’t aware how to treat bears properly,” he said. “After everybody in the campground cooked their evening meal, they put what was left over out on plates and set their lawn chairs out to watch the evening show. All those bears came down and ate up the scraps, so we saw bears every night — right in the campground.”

Beaudet (pronounced Bo-day) went on to get a degree in wildlife science, learning about bears’ natural history — how they live, the wild foods they eat, and the kind of habitat they need. But he discovered exactly what they look like from seeing them out in the wild. On one of four thru-hikes of the Appalachian Trail, he logged 22 black bear sightings in just one day.

“I started looking particularly closely, studying their anatomy, because I had seen a lot of carved bears that didn’t look like an actual bear,” he said. “These whimsical chainsaw bears typically looked like cartoon caricatures — and I wanted to make a more realistic one.”

Shifting his focus from long-distance hiking to maintaining trails in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, Beaudet — known to many by his trail name Bodacious — has been carving bears out of downed logs for a little over a decade. Last summer he found a huge white pine tree that had come down on a National Forest Service road, and it fired his imagination.

“It was a monster,” he recalled. “I felt like I’ve got to make the biggest bear that I can, and I will probably never have this chance again because it’s hard to get a



**John Beaudet - known to many by his trail name Bodacious - has been carving bears out of downed logs for a little over a decade. Last summer he found a huge white pine tree that had come down on a National Forest Service road and carved out of it this 9-foot-tall bear, his biggest yet.** PROVIDED BY FRANCES FIGART

log that big.”

After obtaining permission from the Forest Service, transporting the log eight miles to his home required heavy equipment and help from neighbors. He counted the rings to find the massive tree had been about 100 years old when it fell, probably during a big storm.

The bear he made from it — 9 feet tall including its base — can be seen at Gatlinburg’s Nantahala Outdoor Center, where he hopes to sell it to raise some startup money for the Smoky Mountain BearWise Community Taskforce. Formed in late 2019, the taskforce is a group of business leaders, nonprofit organizations, scientists, wildlife managers and other people working to minimize human-bear conflicts in GSMNP and its gateway communities.

“Since bears are extremely adaptable and have adjusted well to urbanization around the park, it is critical that com-

munities and their leadership recognize the importance of coexisting with bears in a manner that reduces human-bear conflicts — ultimately resulting in a safer environment for residents, visitors, and bears,” said NPS Supervisory Wildlife Biologist Bill Stiver, who helps the BearWise Taskforce in an advisory capacity.

Black bears are highly intelligent. They have excellent long-term memory, and their ability to make connections and draw associations is highly evolved. Bears are also opportunists; they eat what is readily available.

When bears get used to eating human food, they begin to get into trouble. Their behavior can escalate to breaking into cars, hanging around campsites, and even tearing into occupied tents as was seen June 12 in Elkmont. This usually leads to the bears having to be killed or moved to another location — from which they often attempt to return, putting their lives at risk on roads.

“The majority of human-bear conflicts happen May through August, and our most challenging issues with bear



**John “Bodacious” Beaudet and his brother, Al Beaudet, load the pine-log bear for a two-hour ride to Gatlinburg, Tenn., to benefit the Smoky Mountains BearWise Community Taskforce.** PROVIDED BY FRANCES FIGART

management are food and garbage,” says Stiver. “Bears often leave the park and go to gateway communities, where they get into trash and food scraps if people don’t secure them in bear-resistant garbage containers.”

Since the carved Bodacious Bear arrived at the NOC store close to the park boundary in March, hundreds of customers have had their photos taken with it.

“People really gravitate to the bear, especially kids, so it has been attracting a lot of attention,” said Stephanie Fritchman, NOC store manager. “We have the BearWise information out with it, so a lot of people look at the bear and want to learn more about why we shouldn’t feed them or allow them to get into our garbage.”

Once a buyer comes forth, Beaudet will donate half the proceeds to the Smoky Mountain BearWise Community Taskforce.

“I carve bears out of logs so people can have something that reminds them of real bears; it’s like having a bear in your yard all the time, and it makes you think about wildlife out in the forest,” he said. “If the right person comes along that needs this big bear in their lodge and they buy it, the BearWise Taskforce can get some money to help them distribute more information — and it will help real bears.”

BearWise.org provides all the details about how to prevent bears getting access to human and pet food. For information about the Bodacious Bear, email John Beaudet at [BodaciousAT@gmail.com](mailto:BodaciousAT@gmail.com). To learn more about the Smoky Mountain BearWise Community Taskforce, contact Dan Gibbs at [Dan.Gibbs@tn.gov](mailto:Dan.Gibbs@tn.gov).

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**Members of the Smoky Mountains BearWise Community Taskforce visit the Bodacious Bear at Nantahala Outdoor Center in Gatlinburg. From left to right: Matt Auberle of Pink Jeep Tours, Dan Gibbs and Janelle Musser of Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Frances Figart, Laurel Rematore, and Emma DuFort of Great Smoky Mountains Association, and Rich Wilson of Ober Gatlinburg.** PROVIDED BY GSMA

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