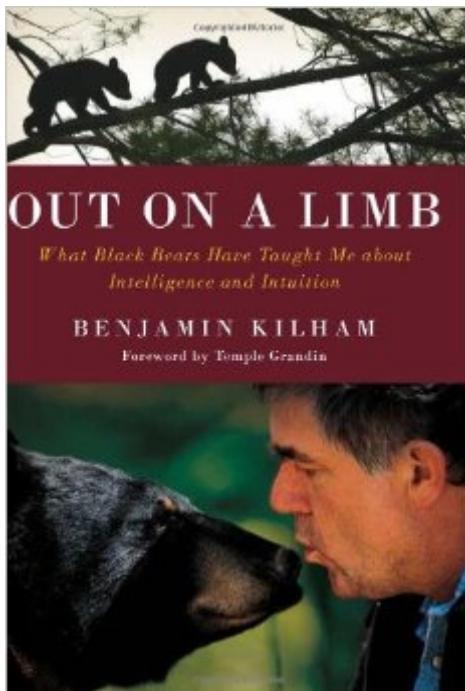


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# Out On A Limb: What Black Bears Have Taught Me About Intelligence And Intuition



## Synopsis

In *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. *Out on a Limb* 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. Kilham and his work have been featured in five internationally televised documentaries. In addition to being on over forty nationally broadcast radio shows including National Public Radio, he has appeared on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *ABC Nightly News*, *The David Letterman Show*, and more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I was not sure about this book at first glance: I like bears, but a guy kissing one on the cover seems a bit much. After reading part of the book I became sure: This book is well worth the reading. Benjamin Kilham has not just studied bears, he has lived with them. He has successfully raised abandoned cubs and followed them throughout their lives. Perhaps more important, he has tried to see the world from the bears' point of view to learn about them and to be a more successful bear parent. Among other findings, Kilham demonstrates that bears have a definite form of society. This social group is held together with rules, sharing, and punishment to fit the crime. He has shown that black bears' social interaction is much more sophisticated than was previously believed. His methods are mostly not the experimental method, but the empirical method: Observe and honestly report. Thus, he has been able to learn more about bears than many researchers could ever learn by trying formal experiments. In addition, he makes it clear when he is drawing conclusions based on clear and repeated behaviors versus when he is making assumptions or speculations about what the bears may be doing. Toward the end of the book, he talks about what learning about bears can tell us about humans. He recognizes that some of what he says may be going far afield, but it definitely fits the facts about both bears and people.

The author of "Out on a Limb: What Black Bears Taught Me About Intelligence and Intuition," Ben Kilham grew up in a family of people who studied the natural world and made a living at it. He helped his father raise and rehabilitate orphaned birds, studies of which his father published (and was criticized for in the scientific community). As a result of dyslexia, the younger Kilham struggled to succeed in a conventional academic setting, but later discovered that "thinking in pictures" was a definite asset when it came to observing the black bears on and around his New Hampshire home. With his wife and sister, he began caring for orphaned cubs, which he studied and then eventually

released back into the wild. And with the successful raising of "Squirty," Kilham gained the bear's trust to the point where she accepted him as another member of her species, giving him a unique window onto bear-world. According to Kilham, bear society is more complex than often believed. Bears have their own social network, which includes both relatives and strangers co-existing on the same land, as with humans, the rules for who is permitted and who isn't, change over time. Bears also have such a keen sense of smell that they can tell by sniffing who has been in their territory, information they may then use to track down and discipline the intruder. This and many other insights help explain bear behavior to the reader that may have previously been misunderstood. Successfully studying (and co-existing) with bears requires you to recognize and respect the bears' perspective. As Kilham puts it, he "pays" for the bears' permission to do such invasive things as examine them and equip them with GPS collars, in exchange for food and other treats. By honoring such a contract, he has discovered many things about the inner workings of bear society, including that bears can demonstrate "human" qualities like altruism, compassion and empathy. I expected the book to delve more into the day-to-day details of raising and introducing orphaned bears back into the wild but still enjoyed it very much. Kilham does seem to have a lot of open anger toward the scientific community which often comes through loud and clear, but I suppose he is justified. I respect what he's done to further understanding of this species, and I hope he eventually finds the respect he craves from the professionals. From reading the reviews here, I think he's already achieved it with those simply interested in wildlife and discovering more about it.

This is an incredible journey of author Ben Kilham who has been studying, for nearly 20 years, the wild black bears as a state-licensed researcher. His work is deemed safe, methodical and it is officially sanctioned. He had the rare ability to read nature and applied these skills to study bears. He has observed these animals closely and continuously and amassed a wealth of knowledge about the way the black bears communicate, socialize and share resources. They not only taught him their world but also allowed him to understand how humans misunderstand the animal world. The academic community uses radio collars, remote cameras and DNA testing to study animal behavior, but the author employed the simplest method in his study; just observe the bears in their own habitat and learn from them. Black Bears have the ability to share, cooperate, judge and punish, forgive and reconcile. This study shattered the "bear myth," and suggests that they are actually social and not solitary animals; they communicate with intention, operate with a moral code, and demonstrate altruism, compassion, and empathy. Bears are intelligent creatures with cognitive skills well beyond science currently recognizes in them. Cooperation and altruism did not begin with

humans. The use of symbols and expressions existed in animals and they evolved in humans. The results of this study with black bear provide an excellent model to understand primal elements of social change. Up to 900,000 black bears live in North America and millions of interactions occur between humans and bears every year, but very few results in human death. From this study, we learn that black bears are highly tolerant of humans and in rare instances where the bear become dangerous, it is only because humans create that situation. We can modify our behavior that signals good responses from our neighbors in the wilderness, says the author. I very much enjoyed reading this book and it reads effortlessly; highly recommended to everyone interested in animal behavior!1. Among the Bears: Raising Orphaned Cubs in the Wild

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