

AVOID UNWANTED BLACK BEAR VISITS

Now is a good time to 'bear-proof' property, wildlife advocates say

Okeechobee, FL Bears in Florida are now awake after months of slumber and are looking for food and mates, which, along with the dry spring in Florida, may lead them to metropolitan areas in search of food. That's why Defenders, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and the US Forest Service in Florida have partnered to create the 'Be Bear Aware' campaign, with accompanying logo and messages that many residents living in bear country will become familiar with.



Florida Governor Jeb Bush, along with other governors around the country, has also designated June 2-8, 2002, as "Bear Awareness Week," with opportunities to learn more about these magnificent animals. For more information, see www.defenders.org/baw.

Human-bear conflicts are not an uncommon annual occurrence in suburban and rural areas near Florida's six major bear populations in the Ocala National Forest/Wekiva River Basin, Apalachicola National Forest/St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, Eglin Air Force Base, Osceola National Forest or Big Cypress National Preserve.

Florida black bears are often persistent in their search for food and will wander into populated areas to find it. Bears are opportunistic with a keen sense of smell rivaling that of a blood hound and have an excellent memory.

So what can people do to prevent unwanted bear visits? According to Christine Small, coordinator of Defenders of Wildlife's, Habitat for Bears Campaign, the first step is to seal trash well.

"Access to garbage and other sources of human food is by far the number one reason bears go to human residences," said Small. "Garbage is the single biggest factor in explaining human-bear conflicts. And that's when people, their livestock or pets can get hurt. Usually, the bear ends up paying the steepest price when it becomes habituated to people. It's too easy for a fed bear to become a dead bear."

Thomas Eason, Bear Management Section Leader for the FWC says "People have to understand that Florida black bears, while known to be naturally shy, timid animals that try to avoid humans, can lose their natural fear and timidity around people when they gain access to human foods. These bears quickly learn to

associate people with food and gradually become bolder and bolder, moving from quick forays at night into human areas to extended stays throughout the day.”

“Be Bear Aware” means that Floridians need to be aware that human sources of food attract bears and condition them to lose their fear of people. Living in bear country means taking common-sense precautions to keep bears away and prevent property damage:

- ◆ Keep human attractants away from bears, especially garbage!
- ◆ Keep garbage in airtight containers inside your garage or storage area.
- ◆ Clean trash cans with ammonia or bleach occasionally to reduce odors that attract bears.
- ◆ Place garbage for pickup outside just before collection and not the night before.
- ◆ Use “bear proof” garbage containers or electric fencing,
- ◆ Do not feed pets out doors, or remove uneaten pet food immediately after feeding,
- ◆ Bear-proof gardens and compost,
- ◆ Remove bird feeders for a week or two if they are hit by bears, and
- ◆ Clean BBQ grills or keep them in bear proof areas.

These remedies may seem burdensome, but they are far better than the alternatives like property damage, injury to humans or pets, or euthanasia of the bear.

“If bears can’t find food near homes, neighborhoods will be much safer because bears will take their search elsewhere,” Small said. “Now is the time for people to ‘bear-proof’ their property by simply walking around outside near their homes, looking at it like a hungry bear might, and removing any bear attractants from sight and smell.”

It’s now illegal to feed bears in Florida - it is a second degree misdemeanor to intentionally feed bears, racoons, foxes or sandhill cranes. In addition to human food sources being bad for the bear, violators can be ticketed and fined.

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