

Tips offered for avoiding problems with bears

by ODFW

CLACKAMAS, Ore. - Spring is a time of renewal in Oregon and around the Pacific Northwest. It is also the time of year when bears wake up from their long winter naps and come out of their dens to look for food.

A black bear cub looks into a home in 2007 after becoming habituated to a neighborhood in Florence, Oregon - Photo courtesy of Donna K. Weaver

Unfortunately, many of these animals get themselves into trouble by looking for meals in all the wrong places -- porches, sheds, garages, garbage cans, barbecues, kennels and bird feeders, where they can become a nuisance or worse.

Not only do these incidents pose a threat to the bear, which may have to be destroyed if the behavior continues, they can also pose a threat to humans who may have a run-in with one of Oregon's largest wildlife species.

Every spring, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife responds to calls from individuals from all over the state concerned about some kind of encounter they have had with a black bear.

Oregon is home to about 25,000 to 30,000 bears. While sightings are not unusual, bear attacks on humans are

extremely rare. Even so, any contact with a bear, or any other wild animal for that matter, should be considered potentially dangerous and be avoided if at all possible.

A few precautions can prevent most of the problems that people have with bears, according to Dave Bostick, assistant district wildlife biologist for the North Willamette Watershed District.

“The fixes are pretty simple,” said Bostick. “Don’t feed the bears -- intentionally or unintentionally.”

Unsecured garbage is one of the leading causes of conflicts between bears and humans, according to Bostick, who recommends keeping garbage cans inside a garage or shed until the morning of pick-up service.

“Don’t put it out the night before or you’re asking for problems,” said Bostick.

Pet food bowls left outside and bird feeders improperly hung are the other primary sources of problems, he said. Pets should be fed inside, and bird feeders should be hung away from the side of a building or trunk of a tree so bears cannot get to them. Store extra bird seed in a secured location, and keep the area under bird feeders clean. Compost piles should be covered and outdoor barbecues kept clean.

The object is to take away any incentive for bears to come around, and it usually boils down to food. These precautions are much more effective if everybody in the neighborhood follows them.

“If you follow these tips but the person down the street doesn’t, they could still cause bear problems for you and your neighbors,” Bostick said. He suggested that if bears are found venturing into a neighborhood that people work cooperatively with each other and ODFW to resolve the problem.

All of these precautions are aimed at keeping bears from habituating themselves to humans because if they lose their fear of people it can become a potentially dangerous situation.

ODFW recommends that in the unlikely event a person encounters a bear they react as follows:

Give the bear a way to escape

Steer clear of bear cubs

Stay calm and do not run or make sudden movements

Back away slowly as you face the bear

Consider talking to it in a firm tone of voice to let it know you are a human

Avoid direct eye contact with the bear.

If you are attacked, fight back, shout, be aggressive, use rocks, sticks and hands to fend off an attack

For more information about living with black bears, visit the ODFW Web site.

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