

Bear-people clashes on the rise

By Stephanie Simon, Wall Street Journal

Forty years after being hunted to near-extinction in many parts of the U.S., black bears have become so plentiful that they are causing trouble for their human neighbors—ripping open camping tents in Colorado, attacking dogs in New Jersey, even breaking into a home in Florida to nab a birthday cake from the kitchen counter.

Bear populations have surged so much that several states, including Nevada, Oklahoma and New Jersey, have started or expanded bear hunting seasons. Texas is circulating a brochure that tells hunters what to do if a bear wanders into camp. (“Talk in a calm manner...Do not run!...Do not play dead!”)

Black bears search for food behind a diner in Pomona, N.Y. Encounters between bears and humans are rising.

Black bears, which can top 350 pounds, were hunted with vigor for centuries. But with their populations near collapse, states began imposing hunting limits or bans in the 1970s.

Recovery has been slow—bears reproduce just every two to three years—but pronounced. Today there are an estimated 3,000 black bears roaming Florida, up from just 300 in the mid-1970s, said David Telesco, who manages bear conservation in the state. Between 300 and 400 black bears live in Nevada, and biologists say the population is growing 16 percent a year.

“There are now bears in areas of the country where there haven’t been bears since the colonial days,” said Rick Winslow, a carnivore biologist with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

J.A. Whittenburg V saw one not long ago—charging toward him on his ranch in south Texas, he said in an interview. His dogs barked furiously. The bear wasn't intimidated. "He just kept coming my way," he said.

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