

Opinion: Be responsible in bear country

By Carol Singleton

May is Be Bear Aware Month and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife reminds the public to act responsibly when in bear country.

Spring is the time of year when California's black bears emerge from their winter dens in search of food. Because bears are attracted to anything edible or smelly, their search often leads them into campsites and residential neighborhoods, where trash and food is readily available.

There are an estimated 30,000 bears in California. Throughout spring and summer, CDFW receives many calls when bears break into homes, rummage through trash bins and raid campsites. These bears are often labeled "nuisance" bears, but in reality they are just doing what comes naturally to them, foraging for food.

"Human-bear conflicts are largely the fault of humans. People need to adjust their behavior when they live and recreate in bear country," said Jesse Garcia, CDFW's bear program manager. "It is absolutely necessary to secure food and trash receptacles to avoid attracting bears. Campers and residents can prevent expensive property damage, safeguard people from injury and save the lives of bears by exercising a little common sense. Bears that become habituated to humans or conditioned to eating our food and trash often have to be killed."

Bears have keen noses and can smell an easy meal from miles away. They can easily tear a front door off its hinges if they smell food left out on the kitchen counter.

The best defense against bear break-ins is not to attract them to your property by following these tips:

- Purchase and properly use a bear-proof garbage container.
- Wait to put trash out until the morning of collection day.
- Don't leave trash, groceries or animal feed in your car.
- Keep garbage cans clean and deodorize them with bleach or ammonia.
- Keep barbecue grills clean and stored in a garage or shed when not in use.
- Only provide bird feeders during November through March and make them inaccessible to bears.
- Don't leave any scented products outside, even non-food items such as suntan lotion, insect repellent, soap or candles.
- Keep doors and windows closed and locked.
- Consider installing motion-detector alarms, electric fencing or motion-activated sprinklers.
- Harvest fruit off trees as soon as it is ripe, and promptly collect fruit that falls.
- Securely block access to potential hibernation sites such as crawl spaces under decks and buildings.

No one wants to worry about housekeeping on a camping trip, but maintaining a clean campsite is the responsible and safe thing to do when visiting black bear country.

Here are a few tips for bear-proofing campsites:

- Use bear-proof garbage cans whenever possible or store your garbage in a secure location with your food.
- Store food (including pet food) and toiletries in bear-proof containers or in an airtight container in the trunk of your vehicle.
- Clean dishes and store food and garbage immediately after meals.

- Clean the barbecue grill after each use.
- Never keep food or toiletries in your tent.

The only species of bears in California are black bears. However, they do range in color from blonde to black, with cinnamon brown being the most common color.

There are an estimated 30,000 black bears in California.

Black bears will seek to avoid confrontation with humans. If encountered, always leave them an escape route.

Males are much larger than females and can weigh up to 500 pounds, although average weight is about 300 pounds.

Black bears can sprint up to 35 mph and they are strong swimmers and great tree climbers.

A typical wild bear diet consists of berries, plants, nuts, roots, honey, honeycomb, insects, larvae, carrion and small mammals.

As winter approaches, bears will forage for food up to 20 hours a day, storing enough fat to sustain them through hibernation. Bears often hibernate in large hollow trees 40 to 60 feet off the ground.

Bears that are accustomed to people can become too bold and lose their fear of humans.

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