

Bears keeping wildlife officials busy

By Scott Sonner, AP

You'd be hungry too if you couldn't find any food and were used to eating the equivalent of more than 80 cheeseburgers a day.

An already busy bear season has exploded in the Sierra Nevada with nine hungry bruins captured since Wednesday morning near Reno and Lake Tahoe as an ongoing drought continues to make food scarce in the mountains. A 10th was hit and killed by a car Thursday in south Reno.

Since July 1, Nevada Department of Wildlife officials have caught 42 black bears and released all but two back into the wild. They said two repeat offenders had to be killed – one so bold it was rummaging through picnic baskets in July on a busy Tahoe beach.

Cars have killed an additional 10 bears as the animals move into more populated areas from the parched foothills on the Sierra's eastern front, where streams are down to a trickle and the usual supply of berries and insects is lacking.



Bears and cubs are prolific on both sides of the state line. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A surge in activity is expected with cooler temperatures this time of year, when a typical bear's food intake jumps from 3,000 to 25,000 calories a day, said Chris Healy, Department of Wildlife spokesman. That's the human equivalent of 83 McDonald's cheeseburgers.

The animals are going through hyperphagia, a physiological change in which they eat as much as they can to store fat for winter hibernation.

"Nothing much gets in the bear's way when they are this hungry," said Carl Lackey, the agency's chief wildlife biologist. "Nature's dinner bell is ringing."

He noted a third consecutive year of drought has exacerbated bear encounters with humans.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife captured 97 bears last year and 83 in 2012, mostly between July 1 and Dec. 1. The 10-year highs and lows were 159 in 2007 and 40 in 2009.

On Thursday, game wardens and wildlife biologists were back on the trail of nuisance bears raiding garbage cans and climbing trees near residential areas in search of fruit. Over the past two days, they've trapped two mother bears and three cubs in the same part of west Reno, a sow and two cubs at south Tahoe near Stateline, and a 2-year-old near Carson City.

"It's pretty wild," Healy said Thursday after they captured the latest one near Carson City. He said the separate bear families caught in Reno on consecutive days were "literally at the exact same spot."