

Human trash a problem for wildlife

By Devin Middlebrook

Bears, raccoons, and other wildlife in search of an easy meal are increasingly visiting residential areas in the Tahoe-Truckee region. It may not always be obvious, but a bag of garbage, bowl of pet food, or plate of leftovers left outside your home or vacation site can harm wildlife.

Of all the wildlife and human interactions, encounters with bears are becoming the most common. The Tahoe basin and surrounding foothills are prime black bear habitat. Forty percent of the California black bear population inhabits the Sierra Nevada.

A typical wild bear diet consists of berries, grasses, plants, nuts, roots, honey, insects, and small mammals. In urban areas adjacent to undeveloped wildlands, bears are optimistic scavengers and are attracted to easy food sources such as improperly stored human food, pet food, birdseed, and garbage. Once a bear has discovered an easy source of food, they will remember that location and return on a regular basis.

Bears that grow accustomed to people can become complacent and lose their fear of humans. This is referred to as human habituation, and it often forces wildlife officials to kill the bear because of the threat it poses to humans. For residents who don't take steps to discourage bears, these interactions can cause expensive property damage, result in fines from local jurisdictions, and pose dangers to visitors and neighbors.

"Residents and visitors living in bear country have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat we share, and also to human neighbors. Improper storage of food or garbage

is attributed to 95 percent of all human-bear conflicts,” said Madonna Dunbar, resource conservationist with the Incline Village General Improvement District. “By removing the attractants, we can reduce risk to both people and wildlife. Preventing access to garbage and food is the easiest way to reduce the risk of human-bear interactions.”

The most secure way to store garbage at your home is by installing a bear box, a large metal enclosure to house trash cans. While the boxes cost an average of \$1,000, they offer the highest level of security from bears. To help homeowners, some local jurisdictions are now offering programs to subsidize the cost of purchasing bear boxes.

Placer County offers no-interest loans for homeowners in Placer County east of Colfax, including Lake Tahoe. Eligible homeowners can apply for a five-year, interest-free loan that homeowners repay through a \$22 per month surcharge on existing quarterly garbage bills.

Learn more about this program **online**.

The Incline Village General Improvement District offers a rebate for homeowners who have an approved bear box installed after July 1, 2015.

The rebate is valued at \$150 and is available for single-family and multi-family homes (without dumpster trash service). To learn more about this program, go **online**.

No matter where you live in Lake Tahoe, it is important to do your part to protect native wildlife by properly storing your garbage, food, and other attractants.

Devin Middlebrook is an environmental education specialist at Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. This article first appeared in Tahoe In Depth.