

Important to remember to be bear aware

By Carol Singleton

With an estimated 35,000 bears, California has a healthy and growing black bear population. In spring, hibernating bears emerge from their winter slumber and begin an almost perpetual search for food.

It is not uncommon for a black bear to consume up to 20,000 calories a day. Unfortunately, this search can sometimes lead bears into populated areas and conflicts with humans.

“A bear’s nose is seven times better than a hound dog’s, and it will lead a bear to anything that is edible or smelly,” said Marc Kenyon, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s human-wildlife conflict expert. “Bears can smell meat drippings on your barbecue, dog food on your porch and candy in your sleeping bag. So if you live near or visit bear habitat, for your safety and the well-being of the bear, always keep your food and trash properly secured.”

Once a bear finds an easy food source, it will return again and again to the same location, and if that food source is a neighborhood or campground, the consequences are not going to be pleasant. Not only can bears get sick from ingesting trash, they can also become dangerous as they begin to associate humans with food.

Bears that become habituated to human sources of food must be killed. Relocating habituated bears does not work. The bears ultimately return to the same neighborhood or another populated area and continue their bad habits – scavenging through trash cans, breaking into homes and even attacking domestic animals.

Although there have been no documented human fatalities from black bears in the state's history, attacks have occurred. In order to keep bears in the wild and people safe, CDFW provides the following Bear Aware tips for people living in or visiting bear country:

For residents:

- 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.
- Avoid using birdfeeders.
- Don't leave any scented products outside, including non-food items like suntan lotion and candles.
- Keep doors and windows closed and locked.
- Consider installing motion-detector alarms and/or electric fencing.
- Keep livestock in secure enclosures.
- 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.

For campers and hikers:

- Use bear-proof trash cans whenever possible or store your garbage in a secure location with your food.
- Store anything smelly including food, 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 your barbecue grill after each use.
- Never keep food, toiletries or anything with a scent in your tent.
- Never intentionally feed bears in order to attract them for viewing.
- When hiking make noise to prevent surprising a bear. Clap, sing or talk loudly.
- Travel in a group if possible.
- Pay attention to the surroundings and watch for bear signs, such as tracks or claw or bite marks on trees.
- Keep dogs on a leash.
- If you see a bear, do not approach it. Make sure it has an escape route.
- If you encounter a bear in the wild, back away slowly. Do not run. Raise your arms to look larger and speak in a calm, loud voice. Do not turn your back.

Carol Singleton works for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.