

Opinion: Importance of being bear aware

By Lisa Herron

Lake Tahoe agencies remind residents and visitors to practice proper food storage and trash disposal at all times while in bear country. Intentional or unintentional feeding of bears can result in the bear being killed, fines and/or jail time for violators.

Every year law enforcement and state wildlife officers respond to hundreds of calls in which bears may pose a public safety threat and/or are damaging property. In some cases, the animals are euthanized. Become part of the solution and help us save our Tahoe bears.

“The Nevada Department of Wildlife appreciates the interagency efforts throughout the Tahoe basin to help keep bears wild and where they belong,” said NDOW bear biologist Heather Reich. “Consistent and informative messaging is something we can all contribute to help residents and visitors be more responsible in bear country.”

The Tahoe basin is a spectacular place to live and attracts millions of outdoor recreationists each year. It is also prime bear habitat with an estimated population of 10,000 to 15,000 American black bears living in the Sierra Nevada. With the onset of warmer weather conditions, bears are beginning to leave their winter dens in search of food. When bears emerge from hibernation, they are extraordinarily hungry and must eat to make up for calories lost during winter. As more people live and frequent bear country, an abundance of unnatural food sources become available to bears. Bears are attracted to anything scented and/or edible. Improperly stored food and garbage are temptations few bears can resist.

Once bears gain access to human food or trash, they will continue to seek it out. They become less cautious of people and may display bold behavior when trying to get to human food. Bears that have become indifferent to the presence of people and have access to human food sources may cause property damage and threaten public safety. Residents and visitors can help keep our bears wild and reduce potential conflicts between bears and humans by acting responsibly while in bear country and properly storing food and trash.

At Forest Service campgrounds in the Lake Tahoe Basin, visitors are required to store food in bear-resistant containers (storage lockers/bear boxes), dispose of trash in dumpsters and close and lock these containers or risk fines, jail time, or both.

California state law prohibits the feeding of any big game mammal and proper food storage is also required by law in California State Parks. Food, beverages, scented items or ice chests left unattended will be confiscated and a citation will be issued. Visitors that violate these rules may be ejected from the park. All counties in Nevada that border Lake Tahoe have ordinances in place prohibiting residents from allowing wildlife access to garbage. Citations and fines can be issued for code violations.

The following are tips for safe-guarding homes, long-term rentals, vacation home rentals or timeshares (if permitted by home or property owner):

- Never feed wildlife. This attracts predators to homes and properties and perpetuates nuisance wildlife activity.
- Purchase, store all trash in, and properly close bear-resistant garbage containers, preferably bear boxes. Inquire with local refuse companies about new bear box incentives and payment programs or go **online** and/or **here** for

more information.

- Never leave groceries, animal feed, or anything scented in vehicles. Bears can open vehicle doors and they may cause damage trying to gain entrance if there are scented items inside.

- Keep barbecue grills clean and stored in a garage or shed when not in use.

- Keep doors and windows closed and locked when the home is unoccupied.

- Vegetable gardens, compost piles, orchards and chickens may attract bears. Use electric fences to keep bears out where allowed. Refrain from hanging bird feeders.

- If neighborhoods experience bear activity, consider using electric doormats and/or electric fencing on windows and/or doors where allowed. Electrified windows and doors should have signs posted for safety and to alert the public and emergency personnel. Contact local vendors and installers for appropriate products and instructions and/or go **online** for more information.

- If a bear breaks into your home, do not confront the bear. Give the bear space and move away so the bear can find an escape route.

Tips for safe-guarding campsites against bear encounters:

- Never feed wildlife.

- Always store food (including pet food), drinks, toiletries, coolers, cleaned grills, cleaned dishes, cleaning products, and all other scented items in the bear-resistant containers (storage lockers/bear boxes) provided at campsites.

- Clean the barbecue grill after each use and store properly.

- Always place trash in bear-resistant dumpsters in campgrounds or in bear-resistant containers at campsites (storage lockers/bear boxes), and close and lock after each use.

- Never leave scented items unattended in campsites, tents, or vehicles. Bears can open vehicle doors and they may cause damage trying to gain entrance if there are scented items inside.

- Never leave trash at campsites.

Tips for hikers and backpackers:

- Hike in groups and keep an eye on small children.

- Please keep dogs on leash. Off leash, dogs can alarm and/or aggravate bears and bring the bear back to you.

- Watch for signs of bears, such as bear scat along trails or claw marks on trees, and stay alert. Make noise while on trails so that bears are aware of human presence and can avoid you.

- Never approach bears or cubs. Always, keep a safe distance.

- Store food in bear-resistant food storage canisters while recreating in the backcountry.

To report human-bear conflicts in California, contact California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Northern California dispatch at 916.445.0380. Non-emergency negative wildlife interactions in California State Parks can be reported to their public dispatch at 916.358.1300. To report human-bear conflicts in Nevada, contact Nevada Department of Wildlife at 775.688.2327. If the issue is an immediate threat, call the local sheriff's department or 911.

This collaborative agency effort includes California State

Parks (CSP), California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), El Dorado County Sheriff's Department (EDSO), Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), and U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU).

Lisa Herron works for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.