

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency Says "Be Prepared For Bears"

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April 25, 2007

Bear populations have increased dramatically in the eastern United States in the last 20 years. Tennessee's bear population is no exception. It is now probably higher than it has ever been in the last 100-150 years. Most of Tennessee's bear habitat exists on public lands in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. As Tennessee's human population increases, and more people move near public lands, bear interactions with humans will continue to increase.

Every year the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) receives hundreds of calls and complaints concerning black bears. Most of the complaints are of bears raiding garbage containers, bird feeders, and pet food left outdoors. Additionally, some irresponsible people even intentionally feed bears. As a result of the improper storage of garbage, easy availability of bird seed, and the direct feeding of bears, animals often become habituated to humans and become a nuisance and a threat to human safety. Nationwide bear management experience has shown the life expectancy of "nuisance" bears may be less than half of that of "wild" bears that do not have repeated contact with humans. Disappointingly, there are no other alternatives but to destroy bears that have become a threat to human safety. Last year hundreds of agency man-hours were spent addressing bear-human conflicts and at least seven bears were destroyed as a result of irresponsible behavior of people directly and indirectly feeding bears. The fact that "*Garbage Kills Bears*" is irrefutable. Remember, a fed bear is a dead bear. As summer approaches and the likelihood of bear sightings increases, the TWRA encourages residents to educate themselves by being "bear aware."

Please help keep our communities safe by preserving the "wild" nature of bears by following these few simple tips:

- Do not feed bears,
- Store garbage in bear-proof containers or in a manner that is inaccessible to bears,
- Do not feed birds between April and January when bears are most active,
- Keep pet food indoors and feed pets in the house or garage,
- Do not add food to your compost piles,
- Keep cooking grills clean and stored indoors when not in use.

When camping or picnicking, keep your site clean. Never leave food or coolers unattended. Never keep food in or near your tent. Store food in properly sealed containers, and whenever possible, store these containers in a vehicle. If camping in backcountry areas, hang packs or food bags at least ten feet off the ground and at least four feet from the trunk of a tree.

TWRA believes that bears and humans can coexist. Often all that is required to prevent bear-human conflicts is to simply stop feeding bears, properly store garbage, remove bird feeders, and/or keep pet food indoors. Disappointingly, some people are often reluctant to do the

simplest of measures to keep our Tennessee bears “wild” and therefore safe. Despite the fact that garbage kills bears, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to communicate this to the public.

Until the public stops feeding bears and acknowledges the fact that garbage does indeed kill bears, then the TWRA along with other responsible wildlife agencies will have no choice but to euthanize bears that become a threat to humans.

For more information and or technical assistant regarding black bears in Tennessee, visit the region IV web site at www.twraregion4.org, or contact the TWRA region IV office at (423) 587-7037.