

Gatlinburg trying to solve problem of garbage, bears

**By Morgan Simmons, The Knoxville News-Sentinel staff writer
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It was 10 a.m., and David Brandenburg looked surprisingly chipper for someone who has been riding around Gatlinburg all night in a city sanitation truck.

Brandenburg wore the uniform of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. His expertise is black bears, not garbage, but when it comes to controlling nuisance bears, he said the two go hand-in-hand.

"Gatlinburg's No. 1 problem is garbage control," Brandenburg said. "If I'm going to figure out a way to solve that problem, I've got to see it from the ground up."

This spring, thanks to joint funding from the National Park Service, TWRA and Gatlinburg, Brandenburg became the town's first full-time nuisance black bear manager.

The new position is part of a multi-pronged bear control strategy that includes a law that makes it illegal to feed black bears in Gatlinburg, and a city ordinance that requires bear-proof Dumpsters and garbage cans in areas of Gatlinburg that adjoin the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Brandenburg, a University of Tennessee graduate who has spent 10 years conducting field research on black bears throughout the South, said that from what he has seen so far, Gatlinburg's food-conditioned bears still have the upper hand.

"We're on the right track, but the problem has been around for a long time and it's not going to disappear overnight," Brandenburg said.

"Bears are second in intelligence only to primates. When they get rewarded with food or garbage - and it doesn't have to be much - they never forget."

In the parking lot of Gatlinburg's Holiday Inn, Brandenburg pointed to a row of Dumpsters outfitted with the heavy, bear-proof lids required by city law, and demonstrated how bears routinely spring the latch and lift the tops.

In the woods barely 30 feet behind the Dumpsters, the ground was littered with garbage. There were fresh bear droppings on the ground, and walking along a well-worn system of bear paths, Brandenburg discovered an empty tranquilizer dart he'd fired just a few nights before.

He said he darted the bear - a 21/2-year-old, 150-pound male - so it could be trapped and relocated to a remote section of the Cherokee National Forest.

"It was walking around people's decks and porches in broad daylight, showing absolutely no fear of humans," Brandenburg said. "I know for a fact that this bear

had been fed intentionally. Basically, when a bear gets habituated to garbage and people, it's a death sentence for the bear."

At another set of Dumpsters in downtown Gatlinburg, Brandenburg spoke with Jeff Cole, part owner of Chalet Rentals, who described the regular late-afternoon visits of a 250-pound sow and her three cubs to the parking lot Dumpster next to his office.

"This container is not bear-proof," said Cole. "I've seen her open it 10 times. She'll open it, get down in there, throw the trash out and leave it open. She can walk up and get in that Dumpster quicker than you or I can."

Cindy Ogle, Gatlinburg city manager, said the city's sanitation and street department is working on a new design for a Dumpster lid that will be heavier and feature a latching system that will deter bears but will be easy for people to open.

Ogle said the Appalachian Bear Center, located in Townsend, is helping to produce and distribute brochures to rental companies to educate tourists about proper garbage disposal and the hazards of feeding bears.

"The biggest issue we have to address is the Dumpsters and the design of the lids," Ogle said. "Another challenge is regularly monitoring the garbage regulations and getting everyone in compliance. We think we've come a long way toward that."

Kim DeLozier, bear biologist for the Smokies park, said bear-proofing garbage is "fundamental" in bear management.

DeLozier said the Smokies will benefit from Gatlinburg's bear management efforts because bears that learn to feed on garbage in Gatlinburg sometimes bring that behavior back into the park.

"I recall a bear we had near Rainbow Falls that would wait till hikers went by and chase them till they threw off their backpacks," DeLozier said. "I don't think that animal became that food-conditioned in the park."

DeLozier said the park has experimented with animal-proof garbage containers for 10 years and that while the current containers are the best so far, there is no perfect design.

"Things rust, things bend, and people damage them," DeLozier said. "It's hard to get a durable container that's user friendly and affordable."

TWRA officials say they've moved eight nuisance bears this year, six of them from Gatlinburg. Biologists say that number is below average and likely can be attributed to a good supply of natural foods, such as blackberries and huckleberries, in the mountains this summer.

But Brandenburg said Gatlinburg's food-conditioned bears are likely to frequent the town regardless of the mast situation in the mountains.

"Garbage has more calories than their natural foods," he said. "A bear on garbage is like a person on drugs. Once they're on it, they're not going to get off."

"There are always going to be bears in Gatlinburg testing the waters, but we don't have to reward them. If someone in Gatlinburg really wants to see a bear, they need to break out a pair of hiking boots and visit the park."

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