

Smokies issue hungry-bear alert

**By Morgan Simmons, The Knoxville News-Sentinel staff writer
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Biologists with Great Smoky Mountains National Park say the black bears are even hungrier than usual this spring.

As a result, park officials are warning visitors to be especially careful about securing their garbage and food.

"We've issued a bear alert to all park employees," said park biologist Kim DeLozier. "The bears are active and bold, and they're looking for food."

Biologists say the park's bears fed well on acorns last fall, and now are trying to regain the body weight they lost while denning during the winter.

The park is home to an estimated 1,800 black bears, while about 5,000 to 6,000 bears are believed to live in the Southern Appalachians as a whole.

DeLozier said natural food for the bears will be in short supply until late June, when the huckleberries, blueberries and blackberries ripen.

"Right now they're losing weight and basically just trying to hold on," DeLozier said.

Biologists say there is a high number of juvenile bears this year, and that right now those bears are just beginning to be weaned away from their mothers.

DeLozier said that makes them lonely and hungry.

"Once their mothers kick them out, the juveniles are in for a few tough weeks," he said. "They're more prone to walk into a developed area to find food."

On Tuesday a jogger along the Brushy Mountain trail in the park told park officials he had to throw rocks at a bear that was following him.

On May 28 park rangers captured and released a 144-pound male bear at the Chimney picnic area. That same day a 258-pound male was captured and released at the Round Bottom horse camp.

The park catches and releases nuisance bears as a method of increasing their aversion to people.

Backcountry campsites 62 and 64 were closed, and warning signs were posted at backcountry campsites 26 and 90.

Last month bear activity was reported at the park's Sugarlands headquarters, Cades Cove campground, Spence Field shelter and backcountry campsite 28.

On May 7 a 200-pound black bear was captured and released near Spence Field. On May 23 that same bear had to be captured and destroyed after it ripped into an unoccupied tent and destroyed sleeping bags and clothes.

"Any time a bear goes into a tent, car or any kind of human space, then it's too risky to have that animal roaming around people," DeLozier said.

On May 10 a 60-pound female bear was captured at park headquarters and destroyed due to brain injuries it had suffered in a vehicle collision.

Last week rangers destroyed a female bear that had torn into an office building of a riding stable inside the park.

On May 14 a 136-pound male bear was captured at the Twin Creeks pavilion and relocated to the Cherokee National Forest. On May 26 that same bear was struck and killed by a car on Interstate 40.

Park personnel have been instructed to report immediately any sightings of bears in developed areas such as campgrounds or picnic areas, as well as any unusual observations of bears along trails or bears acting sick and injured.

Park officials have also posted announcements at campgrounds and picnic areas warning visitors to take extra care in securing their food and garbage.

The park has intensified its black-bear alert procedures since a 50-year-old elementary school teacher from Cosby was fatally mauled on May 21, 2000, while hiking in the backcountry near Elkmont Campground.

Since then the park has changed the wording on its warning signs to say that black bears have killed, not just injured, visitors. The park also has added training on black bears for seasonal and full-time staff and put more emphasis on educating visitors, including information on how to react when black bears show aggression.

"We're trying to be proactive and not just reactive to every situation," DeLozier said.

Morgan Simmons may be reached at 865-3426321 or simmonsm@knews.com
