

## Bears and Bird Feeders

Although many people find it difficult to believe, an animal as large and powerful as black bear is readily attracted to bird feeders as a source of food. Black bears are for the most part vegetarians, and bird seed, even in minute quantities is a highly desirable food for them. In many cases, it is the food of choice and will be sought out over other natural foods. Bear nuisance complaint records from the Region 3 DEC office in New Paltz reveal that at certain times of the year, bird feeders are involved in over 80% of the bear problems around houses. First and foremost, bears are readily attracted to back yards because of the presence of bird feeders. The problem often escalates to other food sources such as garbage cans, barbecue grills and compost piles as bears become bolder and more acclimated to people. Such activities are not in the best interest of either the bears or the homeowners. Bears that learn to approach one house will approach other houses and invariably result in concern from non suspecting people.

What to do ?? It is important to break the pattern of black bears coming to houses for food. Fortunately, most bird feeding activities occur during the winter when bears are in their dens. When bears emerge their dens in March, natural foods are not abundant and bird feeders represent a readily abundant food source. It is highly recommended that bird feeding activities cease at that time if you live in bear country. It is also important to remember that residual seed remaining on the ground will also be attractive to the bears. It should either be removed or treated with a covering scent such as ammonia. Some people start feeding again during early summer and closely monitor their feeders. If any bears return, they immediately cease their operation.

Many people feel they can out-smart the bears by taking their feeders in at night. This may offer some relief, however there is usually enough residual feed from daytime feeding to continue to attract bears. Others attempt to place the feeder high and out of reach of the bear. A bears sense of smell is so keenly developed that the feeder will continue to attract the bear. This often does not discourage the bear from spending considerable time near the bird feeder trying to figure out how to reach it. Some people have had success by mixing cayenne pepper with the bird seed to make it less palatable. This practice has some value with individual bears who will learn to avoid specific feeders, however in bear country, every bear that finds the feeder will have to knock it down to learn that it contains pepper and is not a good source of food. Removal of the attraction is the only long term solution.

Some homeowners receive much satisfaction from their bird feeding activities and are reluctant to stop feeding. Keep in mind that any feed placed out for wildlife is not species specific....it is impossible to pick and choose which animals will be attracted and which animals will not. The choice is up to the individual, however any activity which results in attracting black bears close to homes should be carefully considered. The resulting presence of bears affects their neighbors also, and in the long run does more harm to the bears than good. Bears that become accustomed to approaching houses and people often become chronic nuisances. It is highly likely that they will end up hit by cars, shot illegally by people who misunderstand their intentions and suffer diet deficiencies from continued improper foods.

As is the case with almost all bear human conflicts, if you take away the food you will take away the bear. Black bears, like all wildlife, are best appreciated at a distance.