

# Learning to Live with Black Bears

## Introduction

Black bears have an interesting history as part of Maryland's natural heritage! In pre-colonial times, bears existed throughout the area which is now the state. Early settlers considered them as 'vermin' and a bane to their existence. As our pioneer ancestors cleared forests, bears were extirpated from most areas due to habitat changes and because they were considered a threat to man. Within the past two decades, circumstances have changed. Bear numbers have steadily increased in Western Maryland.

Increasing bear populations and management efforts in surrounding states have resulted in the movement of bears into Maryland, while the increasing age and extent of Maryland's hardwood forests provide quality bear habitat.

Probably no other wildlife species can reflect the true feeling of 'wildness' better than can the black bear! Encounters with bears are remembered and retold for years to come. It is refreshing to discover that a native wildlife species has returned when most current news of wildlife concerns habitat losses and associated population declines. The sight of a bear is proof that Maryland has extensive forest habitat for this wide-ranging animal.

Black bears can become a nuisance, particularly for people who live near prime bear habitat. Conflicts between people and bears arise when bears damage personal property, beehives, livestock, and agricultural crops.

Bears are common throughout western Allegany and Garrett Counties. Although bears live primarily in forested areas, they sometimes wander into cities and towns.

A bear will take advantage of any foods available and will attempt to eat anything that resembles food in looks, smell, or taste. When natural foods such as nuts, meat, berries, insects, and tender vegetation are scarce, bears search actively for anything to eat. This is when bears most often come in contact with people.

When bears find a food source, they will usually return to that source regularly.

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## Bears and People

Bears and people meet under a variety of circumstances. Most bears are wary of people and will usually leave an area when encountered by people. Although seeing a bear can be a memorable experience, some people are frightened when they encounter these animals.

Bears can become a nuisance when they visit homes, resorts, campgrounds and restaurants. Although some bears become used to people, they are still wild animals no matter how 'tame' they may appear. People must always be cautious around bears since they may react unpredictably.

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## Solving Bear Problems

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) - Wildlife Division is responsible for reducing conflicts between bears and people in order to avoid unnecessary loss of bears and to maintain public support for sound bear management.

**DNR manages bears by:**

Providing quality bear habitat through sound forestry practices.

Conducting research to increase knowledge of bear biology.

Educating the public on co-existence with bears.

Assisting citizens with bear problems.

People share in the responsibility to avoid conflicts with bears. Learning effective measures to prevent bear problems will help both bears and people. The best way to avoid bear problems is to take precautions that will not attract them in the first place.

The following measures will help prevent problems around the home, farm, business and when outdoors in bear country. If a problem continues, contact your local office of the Maryland Wildlife Division.

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### **Homes and Cabins**

Bears are attracted to homes and cabins by garbage and bird feeders. Pet food, charcoal grills, fruit trees and gardens may also attract bears. Once a bear finds food around your home it will likely return.

**NEVER FEED BEARS** - They will associate people with food and may become a problem.

To minimize bear problems on your property:

Reduce garbage odors. Rinse food cans and wrappers before disposal.

Compost vegetable scraps.

Keep meat scraps in the freezer until garbage pickup day.

Wash garbage cans regularly and use lime to cut odors.

Keep garbage cans in a bear-proof container or in an enclosed building until morning pickup.

Remove bird feeders in the spring. If you persist in feeding during summer, remove seed, suet and hummingbird feeders at night.

Keep pet food inside.

Keep barbecue grills and picnic tables clean.

Use an energized fence to keep bears out of beehives, sweet corn, fruit trees and berry patches.

An energized fence is powered by a low-impedance, high-voltage energizer which provides a short-duration, high-energy impulse.

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Barking dogs, bright lights and noisemakers will sometimes discourage bears from coming into an area. If a bear comes in your yard:

**DON'T PANIC! DON'T SHOOT! DON'T APPROACH IT!**

Learn to tolerate bears. Many bears are killed or injured when not causing problems.

Most bears fear people and will leave when they see you. If a bear woofs, snaps its jaws, slaps the ground or brush, or bluff charges: **YOU ARE TOO CLOSE!**

Back away slowly.

Go inside and wait for the bear to leave.

If a bear refuses to leave:

Make loud noises or throw something to scare it away.

Always allow the bear an escape route.

If a bear is treed:

**LEAVE IT ALONE!** The bear will usually go away when it feels safe.

Have people leave the area.

Remove your dog from the area.

Sidebar: **NEVER FEED BEARS** - They will associate people with food and may become a problem.

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**Camping and Other Activities**

When outdoors, you may encounter a bear, especially while camping. If you are planning a camping trip to bear country, a telephone call to inquire about bear activities is recommended. If you confront a bear while in the outdoors, remain calm. **DON'T PANIC!**

To reduce the chances of bear problems:

Move to another campsite if fresh bear signs are present.

**NEVER** keep food in your tent.

Use canned and dried foods to minimize food odors.

Store foods out of bear's reach, like in a vehicle or enclosed building (see Figure 1).

Use air-tight or bear-proof containers.

Burn waste paper in your campfire.

DO NOT BURN OR BURY FOOD SCRAPS!

Remove all garbage and fish remains from camp EVERY EVENING.

Rinse containers before disposal, and re-cycle.

Seeing bears can be very enjoyable. However, having a bear in camp can lead to problems. If a problem becomes serious, the bear may be killed unnecessarily.

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**If a bear comes into camp:**

DON'T FEED IT! Startle it away.

Make loud noises, bang pans, yell or use air horns.

DON'T BE GENTLE! Chase it away.

Throw rocks or pieces of firewood. Bears may make threatening sounds, stand upright or possibly bluff charge. Bluff charges can be unnerving but it is rare when a bear cannot be chased away. Remember, these are signs YOU ARE TOO CLOSE!

Spray repellents containing capsaicin (hot pepper liquid) are available to discourage bold bears. These repellents are effective and will NOT injure the bear's eyes or make the bear aggressive. CAUTION! Care must be taken when using these products. Be sure to follow label instructions.

Tie your food bag 10 feet above the ground and 10 feet away from the tree so bears can't reach it.

Resorts, Campgrounds and Restaurants

Bears can be attracted to establishments that have food because of odors and garbage.

**Problems may arise when:**

People are in close contact with bears.

Bears damage personal property.

Bears become dependent on a food source.

Bears scatter garbage.

To help reduce bear problems:

Use bear-proof cans and dumpsters (see Figures 2 and 3).

Move cans or dumpsters away from areas used by people.

Pick up garbage and fish remains promptly every evening.

Wash cans and dumpsters frequently.

Use lime to cut odors.

Teach people to:

NOT FEED BEARS.

NOT STORE FOOD IN TENTS!

Store food out of sight in a car trunk or cabin.

Rinse containers before disposal and recycle.

These precautions will help reduce bear problems. When you find a system that works, stay with it.

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### **Agriculture**

Landowners sometimes experience bear problems with beehives, standing crops, orchards, and livestock.

To control problems:

Corral animals close to buildings at night.

Promptly bury dead animals or take them to a rendering plant.

Eliminate on-farm garbage dumps.

Monitor crops to detect problems early.

Consider electric fencing as a preventive measure.

Beehives contain the perfect bear food, honey and larvae, which supply a source of both carbohydrates and protein. To a bear, there is little difference between a beehive and a hollow tree, except that a hive is probably easier to crack open. Bears will eat standing corn and can severely damage fruit trees. Bears will rarely hunt down and kill livestock, but on occasion have taken, among other things, sheep, swine and poultry. They are, however, often blamed because they are observed feeding on animals that have died from other causes (stillborn calves, for example).

Because of potentially large financial losses, bears are especially troublesome in orchards and beehives. Energized fences are the best long-term control measure for these situations. These fencing systems will prevent wildlife damage when installed and maintained properly. If damage occurs, immediately contact your local office of DNR's Wildlife Division for technical recommendations.

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### **Relocating or Destroying Bears**

Sometimes a bear causing problems must be relocated or destroyed. This is a last resort after exhausting all other options. DNR-Wildlife Division personnel may relocate or destroy a problem bear if they determine this is the best solution. Bears will not be relocated for causing minor property damage, such as tearing down bird feeders or tipping over garbage cans.

Relocated bears seldom remain where they are released. They may return to where they were caught or become a problem somewhere else.

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**Where Can You Find More Information**

If you have persistent bear problems or want more information on bears, contact your local DNR-Wildlife Division Office. See below.

Maryland Department of Natural Resources  
Wildlife and Heritage Division  
Tawes State Office Building, E-1  
Annapolis, MD 21401  
Telephone: 410-260-8540  
Toll Free: 1-877-620-8DNR, Ext. 8540  
TDD: 410-974-3683

Wildlife Division Offices - Western Maryland  
Garrett County  
Mt. Nebo Wildlife Management Area  
1728 Kings Run Road  
Oakland, MD 21550  
301-334-4255

Allegany County  
Cumberland Regional Office  
3 Pershing Street, Room 110  
Cumberland, MD 21502  
301-777-2136

Washington & Frederick Counties  
Indian Springs Wildlife Management Area  
14038 Blairs Valley Road  
Clear Spring, MD 21722  
301-842-2702