

BLACK BEAR PROBLEMS IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Black bears once roamed the entire state of North Carolina. Due to increasing human populations and associated development, bears no longer occupy the piedmont and are found only in the eastern and western parts of the state. Further, many new homes are built in occupied bear range each year. Despite all this, bear numbers have increased over the last 1015 years. As a result, bears and people are coming into contact with each other more frequently than before. Many citizens of North Carolina wish to see bears continue to thrive in the state. Therefore, the challenge is to learn how problems with bears can be avoided in residential areas that are in or near bear habitat.

Are bears dangerous?

Most injuries associated with bearhuman encounters are the result of people feeding bears or when bears are feeding on human sources of food. Simply observing a bear walking through a yard is not cause for alarm. Make sure all garbage is stored or handled as described below and do not provoke or feed the bear. Alert others in the area and request that everyone follow the same procedures.

What attracts bears into a residential area?

Often, houses are located in proximity to areas occupied by bears. Bears will naturally investigate food odors and are attracted to many different foods such as garbage, bird seed and suet, pet foods, compost piles and grease on barbecue grills. Once a bear receives a "reward" such as one of these foods, it may return to the same area several times (even after food is removed) or search around the general area for similar foods. Some bears become fairly tolerant of humans in these situations and appear tame. Remember, bears are wild animals, and are unpredictable. Therefore, the solution to most bear problems is to remove the source of attraction before conflicts occur.

Most problems are temporary

Most bear problems in residential areas are temporary and usually occur in the spring and summer months. Between the time bears emerge from their dens and summer foods such as berries ripen, natural food supplies are low and not very nutritious. This causes bears to travel more in search of food. Also, breeding season occurs from June to August and male bears tend to roam more in search of mates. Finally, during this same time period, young males are dispersing to new territories and often wander into residential areas. Usually dispersing bears remain in an area less than 2 weeks. By keeping food away from bears during those times of increased travel, many problems may be avoided.

Why not just move problem bears?

There are several reasons why moving problem bears is not an option. First and foremost, moving a bear does not address the problem. If the problem is not fixed, other bears will move in to take advantage of the food source or, the bear that was moved may return to become a problem once more. Second, catching a wild animal such as a bear puts both bears and people at risk of injury, especially in residential areas. Finally, there are no longer areas that are sufficiently remote to ensure that a relocated bear would not encounter other residences and possibly become a nuisance there.

How are bear problems best handled?

There are many things that can be done to minimize or eliminate the chances that bears will get into garbage or become a problem in an area. Any of the methods described below work best if implemented as soon as the problem starts, or better still, before problems occur. Once a bear establishes a feeding pattern, it will take longer to encourage the bear to move on. By following some of the tips listed below, residents can usually prevent the bear from being rewarded the first time.

Do not allow bears access to garbage or other food. Store garbage inside buildings or other areas that bears cannot get to. Do not feed bears under any circumstances. If the area is served by a garbage collection service, place garbage out only during the day of collection. Under no circumstances should garbage be left out overnight. Keep all garbage sites clean. Do not leave pet foods out overnight. If bird feeders have been visited by a bear, stop feeding birds for 1 to 2 weeks. Persons living in bear range should install "bearproof" containers or use dumpsters with heavy gauge metal lids as a longterm solution to bear problems.

Repellents. There are no repellents that are registered for use on bears. Some have found that sprinkling ammonia or other strong disinfectants on garbage can mask the odor of food.

Exclusion. The following have helped to prevent bear damage. Make sure dumpsters are bolted and locked and chain down heavy metal garbage cans and secure the lids. Wood or plastic dumpster lids do not keep bears out. Replace these with metal lids that can be locked and make sure sliding side doors can be latched so only humans can open them. Fencing in dumpsters or garbage collection areas can be very effective. A chain link fence with a barbwire overhang can work well. An electric fence powered with a high voltage, low impedance charger can exclude bears; however, this should only be done if safety precautions can be implemented to protect children and adults. There are several electric fence designs which can be provided by the local district biologist if this is deemed appropriate.

Frightening or scaring the bear. Shouting, clapping, blasting a car horn or motionsensitive lights may scare off a bear temporarily. Do not taunt a bear if it fails to respond to your efforts to frighten it. These methods are only temporary solutions.

Crowd Control. Sometimes when a bear sighted, crowds may gather. This seemingly harmless situation can be aggravated or become potentially harmful as the crowd grows. People can cause bears to display unpredictable behavior. Law enforcement personnel should disperse crowds and allow the bear to exit without interference.

Summary

Black bears are an important part of North Carolina's fauna. As people move into bear country in increasing numbers, it is ultimately human attitudes toward bears that will determine whether bears will continue to exist in the state. Unfortunately, bears are viewed either as dangerous animals or cuddly pets. It is best to avoid these extreme views and instead show a healthy respect for this magnificent forest animal. We have provided some simple, common sense steps you can take to do your part in ensuring that bears and people can live together. As a temporary or permanent resident in bear country, take these steps to avoid attracting bears and to prevent conflicts from occurring. Remember, prevention is the best medicine!