

DOW Insider

BEAR ACTIVITY INCREASES DURING FALL

Beginning now until winter begins, bears will be persistently looking for food to bulk up for hibernation.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) reminds homeowners it is especially important to take care not to attract bears with garbage or other food sources. Because bears are eating more and more everyday, people might see more bears near their homes.

Tonya Sharp, district wildlife manager in Teller County, explains that if a bear enters a homeowner's yard it doesn't mean the animal is going to cause problems.

"Just because a bear is near your house doesn't mean it is being aggressive," said Sharp. "Black bears are not aggressive animals – it's probably looking for food. The closer we get to winter; bears will be searching for food up to 20 hours-a-day."

While bears eat some meat, they are not predators in the same sense that mountain lions are. Bears might kill chickens, rabbits and other penned livestock, but generally do not stalk food the way a lion will.

Up to 90 percent of a bear's diet is vegetation. The 10 percent that is carnivorous usually consists of insects and carrion (dead animals).

"When a bear is eating it is generally not aware of anything else," Sharp said. "If someone yells at a bear and it doesn't move, it doesn't mean it's being aggressive."

Colorado's black bears are currently in a transition period, moving from grasses, forbs, flowers and other summertime foods to berries and acorns. As bears become more active in their search for food, it increases the chance of encounters between people and bears.

Biologists estimate that adult bears need to consume up to 20,000 calories per day in the fall to store enough fat to sustain them through hibernation. Even when acorns and berries are plentiful, bears will try to find the easiest source of food available. "If that food is in a backyard, that's where they'll go," Sharp said.

"Bears are looking for high-calorie food, and they can find that in things like dog food, bird seed and human food scraps," Sharp said. "Bears can be tough, persistent, intelligent and aggressive animals when they want something, but if human food is not

available, they'll go someplace else to find something to eat," she said.

The longer a bear hangs around where people live, the more dangerous it is because it becomes habituated to humans. In some cases, trapping, relocating or destroying them must be considered, said Sharp.

The DOW takes a dual approach to solving bear conflicts. The first line of defense is to inform homeowners, campers, hikers and others on how to protect themselves in bear habitat. Rather than immediately removing problem bears, wildlife managers ask people to first remove whatever might be attracting the bruins in the first place.

Wildlife officers will use rubber buckshot, pepper spray, and other techniques to persuade bears to leave an area. If those methods fail, wildlife managers will consider trapping and relocating bears. Anything that can attract bears must have been removed beforehand, however.

"If the reasons for the bear being there in the first place are still there after we trap a bear, we've only solved the immediate, short-term problem. In most of those cases another bear moves in and takes its place," Sharp said. "It's critical that we work toward solving the problem permanently."

The towns in Colorado that have had the most success reducing bear conflicts are the ones that have adopted community-wide standards. It only takes one person in an entire subdivision who refuses to remove attractants to cause bear problems for everybody.

Sharp encourages anyone who lives in bear country to "bear-proof" their house. She recommends keeping all lower level windows and doors secured and installing an electric fence around chicken coops, rabbit hutches and areas where livestock feed is stored.

Bears have a highly developed sense of smell. We might not be able to smell food inside a freezer, but a bear can. "Anyone with a refrigerator or freezer in their garage should remember to keep the garage door closed," she added.

Over the past decade, bear management has become more challenging because Colorado's human population has grown and expanded into bear habitat. "It might seem like there are more bears causing trouble. The fact is that we still have about the same number of bears but we have a lot more people living and recreating in places where bears live," said Sharp.

Colorado is home to between 8,000 and 12,000 black bears. Black bears are between 4-6 feet long and weigh between 150-450 pounds. They may be black, brown and even cinnamon in color.

The DOW offers these tips to reduce bear problems:

- Keep garbage in airtight containers and stored in an enclosed area such as a garage or shed. Place the garbage cans outside just before scheduled pick-up, not the night before. It is also important to clean your garbage cans with ammonia on a regular basis in order to remove food smells.
- Take down bird feeders, including hummingbird feeders, at night. Bird feeders have been found to be a common attractant for bears. Empty shells of sunflower seeds and other birdseed can still attract bears by scent, so be sure to clean up any shells under the feeder area.
- Do not leave pet food or bowls outside. Feed pets inside or bring the bowls in promptly after feeding.
- Do not put food items such as meat, fruit, or vegetables, in your compost pile.
- Clean up fallen fruit from bushes and fruit trees.
- Keep lower windows and doors closed and locked. Bears have been known to tear screens off trying to get at food they can smell inside.
- Put an electric fence around chicken coops, rabbit hutches or areas where livestock feed is stored.

The DOW urges you to keep your property clean of bear attractants. It is important that bears forage on natural food sources in order to maintain healthy populations throughout the state with a minimum of human/wildlife conflicts.