

ENVIRONMENT



Photos courtesy of Laraine Mai

Bird seed attracts black bears to a local backyard.

Bears are better off wild

Beware leaving food sources out in your yard

By Pam Uihlein

For the Poughkeepsie Journal

Perhaps it's because we spend so much time in built environments — houses, buildings, roads — that it can be exciting to witness and connect with nature. And nothing is a clearer sign there is still "wild" in our world than the presence of a large animal such as the black bear. Seeing a bear in its natural environment is a peak experience for many outdoor and wildlife enthusiasts. Yet when bears wander into backyards and through streets, they often evoke reactions of fear and annoyance instead.

New York's bear population has increased alongside ever-expanding development, bringing their world and ours closer together. When this happens, bears become less wild — which in turn compromises their health and well-being and gives rise to conflicts with people. Keeping bears wild is an attainable goal that requires understanding their natural history and changing our own behaviors.

RETURNING WITH THE FOREST

As with many wildlife species in New York and throughout the Northeast, black bears have gone through cycles of abundance, depletion and recovery. Bears once ranged virtually everywhere, but their population declined with the widespread deforestation that resulted from intense logging, agriculture and hunting in the 18th and 19th centuries. With the re-



PROGRAMS SET

On Thursday evenings from Jan. 24-Feb. 28, Mohonk Preserve and other members of the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership will host evening programs on the habits and habitats of migratory animals, including bears. Visit the events and programs page at www.mohonkpreserve.org or call **845-255-0919**.

growth of forests in the last several decades, black bears and many other animals have returned.

Today, there are an estimated 6,000-7,000 black bears in New York. As migratory animals with large home ranges, bears have an established presence throughout much of the state's forest-

ed areas. Some bears travel up to 50-100 miles in search of food and mates, and may even migrate from and to adjoining states such as Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

BRINGING BEARS CLOSER

Like any animal trying to survive, bears are driven by the quest for food. Eating is one of the most important tasks for black bears in the spring, summer and fall months. During that time, bears need to store up the fat reserves they will live off for the entire winter, which they spend in a state of dormancy in dens. (Under normal temperature patterns in southern New York, bears enter their dens sometime in November and usually don't emerge until late March.) Adequate nourishment is essential for reproduction: a well-nourished pregnant female will give birth to her cubs in the den as long as she has adequate fat reserves, but a malnourished bear will not be able to support a pregnancy and might even starve.

It's no small chore to store up the calories a bear needs to survive and thrive: average adult bears need 8,000-10,000 calories a day, which can increase to 20,000 as they prepare for winter. Bears are highly intelligent, and both opportunistic and skilled when it comes to finding food. In this region, bears are largely vegetarian and readily seek out many types of berries, nuts, plants and insects. They may

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Bears: Easy meals are tempting

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also eat meat — usually animals that are already dead — and will occasionally hunt small animals such as rodents.

Wild bears rely on natural food sources and are unlikely to be encountered around houses and other human development. But if given the chance to access “easy calories” — bird seed, pet and livestock food, garbage and dirty barbecue grills — many bears will take it.

Once a bear learns these are potential food sources, they will return to a site in search of more and will likely visit other homes looking for similar items. Eventually, bears can become habituated, or dependent, on non-natural food sources — which is unhealthy for them and unnerving for people and communities.

REDUCING CONFLICT

The only real solution to keeping bears away from houses, backyards and other developed areas is to thoroughly remove the food that attracted them there. Better yet, we need to prevent access to non-natural food sources in the first place.

On the Web

For more information, visit the Department of Environmental Conservation's Web site at www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6960.html or the North American Bear Center at www.bear.org

When human-bear conflicts do arise, it's usually the bear who loses — wildlife agents will try to remedy the situation with homeowners, but if “problem” animals continue highly negative behavior, they may be destroyed.

All wildlife, including bears, would prefer to avoid people. Animals become aggressive only if they are highly habituated to people, are sick, feel harassed or threatened or are protecting their young. Many people have close encounters with bears without even knowing it — bears use their keen sense of smell and hearing to quickly sense approaching humans and will leave an area to avoid being detected.

Even the most food-habituated bears pose very little threat to humans; they are

much more interested in the attractants around houses and other developed areas. According to the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation, between 1960 and 2000, there were only 10 reported cases of minor injuries to people by bears; during the same period, only three fatalities by bears occurred across the entire eastern United States.

During the quiet winter months while bears are denning, we have an opportunity to evaluate our own behavior and plan for changes we can make to prevent another bear from becoming habituated. Before bears reappear and begin their search for food to nourish themselves and their newborn cubs, we can take steps to create a world in which bears and humans can co-exist and where the wild remains.

Pam Uihlein is an educator and outreach specialist at the Mohonk Preserve. She has a background in environmental education and predator conservation and leads programs for children and adults on aquatic environments and coexisting with wildlife.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are many things that we can do to prevent bears from becoming habituated to humans and developed areas. Please share these tips with your neighbors; keeping bears wild is a community-wide responsibility.

- Never feed bears, intentionally or unintentionally.
 - Only feed birds from Dec. 1 to April 1 — the period when bears are denning. Taking in bird feeders at night is not effective. Often, there is enough residual seed left from the day to attract bears, and some bears will quickly learn to show up during the day instead.
 - Never feed pets outdoors or store pet or livestock food in an unsecured location.
 - Put garbage out only on the morning of pick-up or store garbage in a bear-proof can or building and transport it directly to your local transfer station.
 - Always clean barbecue grills well after each use.
 - It's wise to give all wild animals space. Never harass or approach a bear, even if it seems quiet and relaxed.
 - If you do see a bear, make noise so the bear is aware of you. In most cases, the bear will take the initiative and leave the area quickly. If the bear lingers, continue making noise and slowly back away from the animal.
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