



Young black bear by Steve Maslowski, USFWS

months. Weather starts to warm usually in early March, and the bears wake and begin raiding trashcans. 2010 was a strange weather year, and the bears did not get really active until May, so they slept longer, and awoke hungrier. By mid to late summer, the problem bears usually back off and go eat blackberries. But in 2010, the local blackberry crops were small, and the problem bears did not relent. Fall of 2010 saw small acorn crops as well, and without alternative natural foods, the bears remained near people where food could be obtained.

Understanding bear behavior is key to avoiding unwanted encounters. Bears are ALL about food—every waking minute. Average adult females weigh between 125 and 150 pounds, and males usually weigh about 180 pounds, but can get as big as 300 or more pounds. All that bear takes a lot of food! Thankfully, we're not on the menu. They are not looking to eat people. But they are opportunist omnivores, which means they eat almost anything. If a person, or any other animal on the face of the earth considers something food, a bear will likely agree and eat even more! Favorite foods are berries, nuts, grasses, carrion, and insect larvae. Being opportunistic, though, means that if food is easier to get at your house they are happy to be your guest.

Prevention: take steps to avoid contact

Bears can smell food from a much greater distance than a human. The nasal mucosa on a bear is reported to be about 100 times larger than a human. Just because you don't smell it doesn't mean a bear won't. Take the following steps to reduce the odds of an unwelcome encounter:

- **TRASH:** Keep your trash can clean,

washing with ammonia or bleach, and keep the can out of sight in an outbuilding or under a tarp. Bears know what trashcans look like.

- **BIRD FEEDERS:** Taking a bird feeder down for the evening may help if it has attracted a bear previously. Consider using a cloth under the feeder to catch falling seeds. It will be easy to collect the seeds and throw them away nightly.
- **PET/LIVESTOCK FOOD:** Store food in secured outbuildings or barn, preferably in a sealed container. This may require chaining or locking barn doors.
- **FRUIT TREES:** Hot-wire fencing is an option. If you only have a few trees, it may be sufficient to simply pick fruit ASAP and don't let fruit ferment on the ground.
- **AROUND THE FARM:** Delectable smells can come from many sources, such as compost piles, chicken coops, or beehives. Avoid adding to compost piles when bears are around and make sure coops and pens are sturdy. Hot wire is an option.
- **AROUND THE HOUSE:** Clean outdoor cooking areas and keep your BBQ in an outbuilding or under a tarp. Don't put refrigerators, freezers, or other food appliances outside.
- **SCARE TACTICS:** Bears will generally avoid areas with one or more of the following: large barking dogs, lights that come on and off with a motion detector, a sprinkler with a motion detector, or a radio set on a timer.

What to do if you see a bear

Spotting a bear can be exciting or frightening depending on the circumstances. Black bears have color vision along with that keen sense of smell mentioned earlier. They are good tree climbers and swimmers, are very intelligent and curious, and can run up to 35 mph! Most injuries occur when people treat wild bears as pets by leaving food out for them (inadvertently or not), trying to get pictures, or otherwise interacting.

Bears are typically shy and easily frightened unless they have become habituated to humans. If you know the bear is around, just say NO! At night, leave more lights on. Be especially observant, and make loud noise when outside, especially when going around a blind corner. Frequently, loud noise will scare away a bear—bang pots and pans, set off your car alarm, safely shoot a gun. Let him know you are not pleased!

If you come face to face with a bear, avoid eye contact and back away. Do NOT scream and run like a prey animal! Yogi may

be cute, but bears need to be treated with respect. Educate kids. Keep kids close and avoid outdoor play at dawn and dusk. If your child tries to run at the sight of a bear pick your child up and speak calmly. Back away slowly and do not block the bear's escape route. Remember the bear is scared too. The bear may stand up to sniff or get a better view. Remain calm and continue to back slowly away avoiding eye contact. It's also a good idea to alert neighbors about a bear sighting. You should also report sightings and encounters to your local ODFW office.

If you find a bear helping itself to the sunflower seeds you put in a metal can for bird feeding, or the oats for the horses, or the overripe produce you failed to discard, do not attempt to chase the bear off. It may protect its food source. Instead, make a loud noise as described above and try to scare the bear away. Then take action to remove food sources.

Typical bear encounters and the law

There have been no reports of unprovoked black bear attacks in Oregon. But if a bear exhibits unusually aggressive or persistent behavior, safety issues may be addressed through lethal means. Jackson County has a USDA Wildlife Services agent to assist people with bear removal, but Josephine County does not. Relocation is not an option. Relocated problem bears usually return from great distance to where they were captured, and if they don't, they invariably find the nearest campground or home and continue their problem behavior.

Most bear complaints are "nuisance" complaints. These problems can usually be solved non-lethally, through preventative action. But if bears aren't stopped at the nuisance level, they typically progress to damage-level problems. Damage is defined in the Oregon statute as "loss of or harm inflicted on land, livestock, or agricultural or forest crops." Damage may legally be addressed through lethal means, but bear damage may also be addressed through preventative/protective means.

Bears that come into frequent contact with people may become human safety threats. Threat to human safety is defined in statute as

"A) Aggressive actions directed towards a person or persons, including, but not limited to, charging, false charging, growling, teeth popping, and snarling.

B) Breaking into, or attempting to break into a residence.

C) Attacking a pet or domestic animal as defined in ORS 167.310. And

D) Loss of wariness of humans, displayed through repeated sightings of the animal during the day near a permanent structure, permanent corral, or mobile dwelling used by humans at an agricultural, ranching, or construction site."

Nothing in the wildlife laws is intended to prevent any person (or their agent) from taking a bear that is causing damage or posing a human safety threat. (ORS 498.012). A tag is not required to take the animal, day or night, on the property where the damage or safety issue occurred, but the following rules apply:

1) immediately after taking the bear, Oregon State Police must be notified (this is what separates you from a poacher).

2) Bear meat is considered edible for human consumption, just like a deer or elk, and cannot be wasted. So field dressing the bear is required, and depending on the circumstances, the landowner may or may not be allowed to keep the bear. Landowners may give their bear to anyone they choose, or ODFW will see that it goes to charity. Wasting bear meat is illegal. 3) The head of the bear must be brought to an ODFW office for data collection and tooth extraction. All bear hunters are required by law to bring their bear heads to ODFW for data collection and tooth extraction. You can contact Rosemary Stussy of ODFW at 541-826-8774 to report problem bears.

Ecosystem role

Whether you enjoy seeing the occasional bear or wish you didn't live among them, they do fill a role in the ecosystem. According to the website of the National Park Service (www.nps.gov) the black bear is at the top of the food chain and as such influences prey populations by culling the unhealthy in the herd/flock. Foraging activities aid decomposition of the forest as they tear apart logs in search of insect larvae. Insects become less numerous as the larvae is eaten. Seeds of various plants are distributed in a greater area as the bears consume berries, other fruits, acorns and grass seed along with various other plants.

It benefits the forest and the prey populations to keep a healthy bear population. You can do your part to keep nature in balance by following the suggestions in this article to keep the bears in the forest. Getting to see a bear and her cubs cross the road in front of you is exciting. Coming out in the morning to find a bear has broken into the trashcan and strewn trash about can make for a cranky way to start the day.

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