

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation



Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources, Region 3

Bureau of Wildlife

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BLACK BEARS FOR NEIGHBORS?

Black bears are more common in New York than most people realize, with the population estimated to be near 5,000. While the largest concentration of bears is in the Adirondack Region, substantial populations also exist in the Catskills and Western New York and New Jersey, resulting in bears constantly roaming into Southern New York looking to establish new home ranges.

The black bear is New York's second largest land mammal. An average adult female weighs 150 pounds. Adult males are considerably larger, averaging 300 pounds with occasional animals tipping the scale at over 600 pounds. Black bears typically range over large areas, with some home ranges covering hundreds of square miles. Black bears eat both plant and animal foods, but the bulk of their diet is usually plant material. Animal foods are usually ants, grubs and animals that are already dead or partially decayed. Above all, the black bear is an opportunist and will take advantage of almost any readily available food source.

Your chances of seeing a black bear in the wild are low because of a strong instinct to avoid people. But this fear of people has not remained in all bears. It is lost in the individuals attracted to unprotected food and garbage. These attractions often take unusual forms that we don't think of. Bird feeders are by far the most common attraction. This is not a problem during the winter months when most people are feeding birds and bears are denning. However, many people like to feed birds year round and this ready source of food becomes quite an attraction. Other common attractions include pet food left outside for cats and dogs when it is not completely eaten by the pet each day, livestock feed that is left unprotected and grease and odors left on the outdoor barbeque grills. Bee hives have always been an attraction, but bee keepers in bear country learned long ago the necessity and effectiveness of electric fences in protecting their hives.

FOOD is the "key" word here. Living with bears in bear country is easy if you just keep that in mind. If a bear shows up, remove the attraction immediately and the bear usually disappears within a day or two. If you insist on leaving something out that is attractive to bears, you must protect it with something like an electric fence or by making

it physically inaccessible. Problems often arise when people intentionally put food out to attract bears for observation or photography. This can quickly get out-of-hand and unforeseen damage can occur, or it can create problems for unsuspecting neighbors. It should be noted that it is illegal to feed bears within 500 feet of any occupied building (unless owned and occupied by the person feeding), school, playground, paved public road, designated or established campsite, landfill or dump. It was long ago recognized the kind of problems this activity creates.

People often ask, "Why doesn't DEC just trap and remove or relocate these problem bears?". DEC rarely traps and moves bears for several reasons. In bear country, removing the bear and leaving the attraction is a very short term solution; it doesn't take very long for another bear to come along and find the attraction. Vacant territories are very quickly taken over by other bears. Black bears also have a homing ability that we do not fully understand. Adult bears have a very strong attraction to their home range and if moved, return very quickly. In Southeastern New York, we have moved bears as far as 60 miles only to have them return to the exact capture location in several days. For both of these reasons, the manpower and expense of moving a problem bear is neither effective or cost efficient. Removal or securing the food attraction will almost always eliminate the presence of a bear.

The issue of human safety is always on the minds of people who see a bear near their house. Black bears are impressive animals and reactions to them are based on expectations of what a bear could do as opposed to what bears actually do. Wild animals of any size should not be approached, touched or fed. Black bears almost always retreat and avoid humans if possible. Bears that have learned to associate food with humans or houses can become persistent. Once again, removal of food and sometimes additional negative conditioning will change the bear's habits.

Want more information on black bears? If you have access to the Internet, go to the DEC Web Page for Black Bear information at:

www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/wildgame/bear.htm or go to the web site of the North American Bear Center at www.bear.org. and you'll find information on black bears, human safety, living with bears, what to do if you see a bear and bear life history.