

Bear COUNTRY

MEET THE NEW NEIGHBORS—AND SURPRISE, THEY DON'T WANT TO EAT YOU. AS HUMAN AND BLACK BEAR POPULATIONS EXPAND AND OVERLAP, THIS NATIVE ANIMAL IS UNDER FIRE. BUT BEAR-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES SHOW WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN WE PUT DOWN THE GUNS AND START CLEANING UP OUR ACTS.

by KAREN E. LANGE

It was when Robert Scott ran into three black bears on their way to his kitchen that he realized things had to change. The mother bear and her cubs had broken through two screen doors and entered the porch of his Wintergreen, Va., home on that night in 2007. When they found the door to the kitchen locked, the discouraged bears left. But they kept busting into other homes—someone must have given them food—and later in the summer a mother and two cubs, believed to be the same trio, were shot by authorities. All told, nine bears were killed or relocated that year and the next for rummaging in Wintergreen.

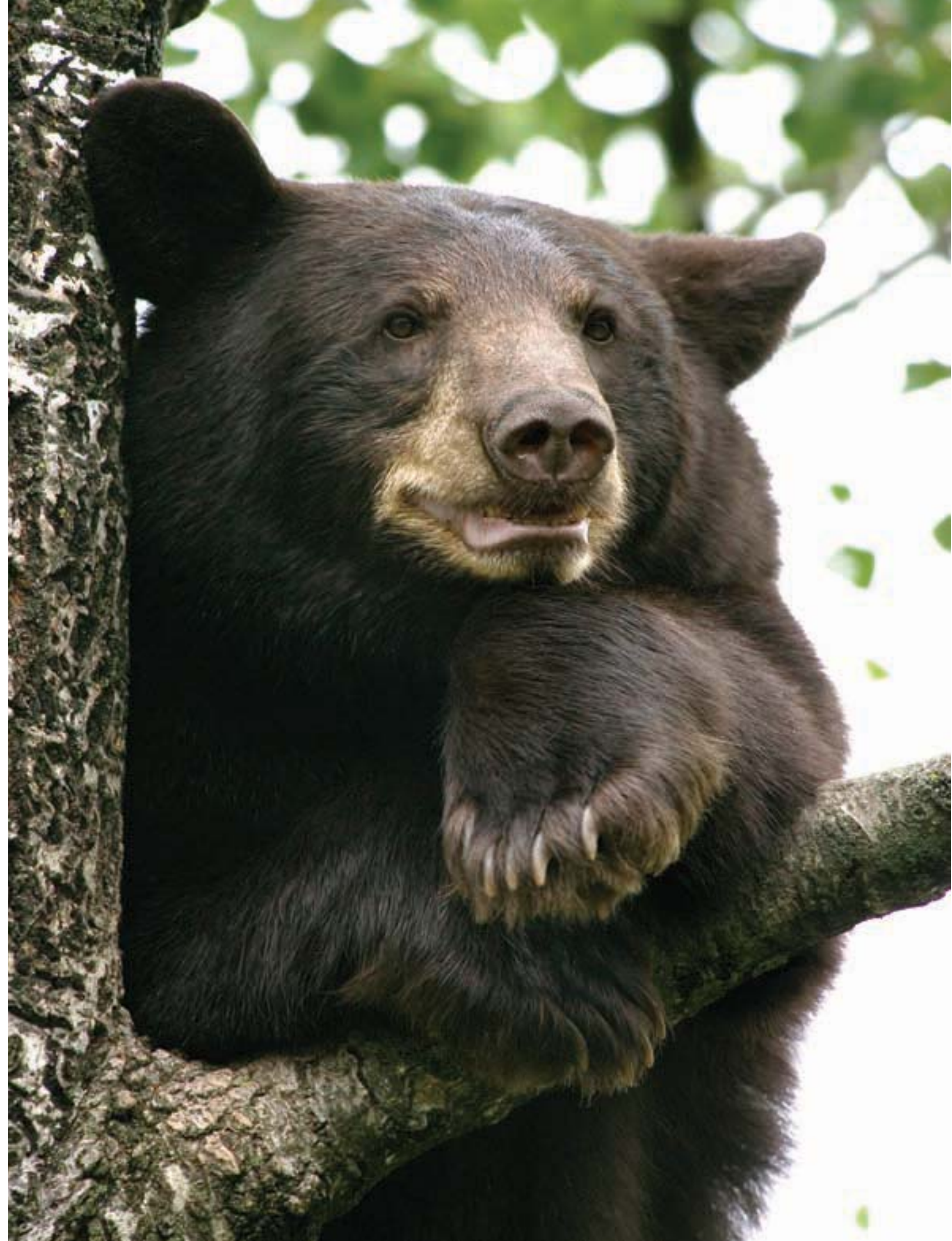
Scott and his wife, Sarah, had bought a retirement home in the resort community near the Blue Ridge Parkway to live amongst wildlife. To the couple's delight, as they sat on their screened porch, they would occasionally see a bear walk to a stream below their house to get a drink of water.

But within just a few years, they were watching bears killed after being tempted into the area by bird feeders and easily opened trash cans. Virginia's black bear population has rebounded in recent decades, helped by limits on hunting and the return of forest. Once pushed to the extreme west of the state, today bears roam every county except those on the eastern fringe. Looking for a way to live with their new wild neighbors, the Scotts began doing online research. They found an approach that's worked in places across the United States and Canada: not the hunting often presented as a commonsense response to growing human encounters with bears, but a gentler and far more effective answer that goes by different names, including Bear Aware, Bear Wise, and Bear Smart.

Using information from the Get Bear Smart Society in British Columbia—which has the most bears of any region in North America—the Scotts and other interested residents formed a council to educate people about not feeding bears, either directly or indirectly. Soon, the Wintergreen Property Owners Association board approved a ban on bird feeding from April to December, plus a requirement that garbage be either kept indoors or stored in locked, bear-resistant dumpsters.



In Yellowstone National Park, a man strays within the park's required 100-yard boundary to photograph a black bear. If we're to coexist with bears, we'll need to restrain the part of human nature that desires these close encounters.



“There’s no question that it’s possible for people and bears to coexist without serious problems if we’re willing to manage our food and garbage. If you’re willing to [do this], bears become nonentities; they start to ignore you.”

— STEPHEN HERRERO, UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY BIOLOGIST

The Bear Smart Council also advised the hundreds of full-time residents and temporary visitors to take simple steps like cleaning grills and keeping pet food inside. Most people complied. By 2009, break-ins stopped and the number of bears killed or removed dropped to zero.

“We still have a lot of bears, but they’re acting more like they’re supposed to,” says Scott. “... They’re pretty shy, unless they get human food. ... Most of the time you never see them.”

That’s good news for a species that has seen human civilization advance to its doorstep. As black bear numbers increase in North America—to an estimated 950,000, up more than 20 percent since the late ’80s—and as more people move into bear habitat, encounters between bears and humans have risen. Trophy hunters have seized the opportunity to demand that hunts be reintroduced or expanded. But experts understand better than ever how people and bears can coexist peacefully, even deep in the woods, even in years when natural food is scarce or in places where both humans and bears are plentiful. To begin with, people have to understand who black bears really are—and it’s not the fearsome creatures of popular myth who rise up on their hind legs, teeth bared, and have to be killed before they themselves kill.



IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Those creatures reside only in human imaginations, the product of a time when farmers exterminated bears to protect their livestock: Think Old Slewfoot (a colloquial term for the devil) in the novel *The Yearling*. As recently as 1965, Minnesota authorities offered a bounty on bears, classifying them as “varmints”; people could kill unlimited numbers in any manner, at any time of year. Taxidermists and sculptors in love with dramatic poses—bears rearing aggressively, mouths forced into unnatural snarls—have reinforced these stereotypes, as have hunting magazines, TV programs, and websites.

American black bears can run more than 30 mph, and their compact muscles make them much stronger than people. But during the past 110 years, noncaptive black bears have killed just 63 people in the U.S. and Canada, according to a study published this year. Naturally, as the human population has grown, so has the number of fatal bear attacks—but they still average fewer than two per year. More people are killed by

bees. By spiders. By dogs. By lightning.

“More people are killed in vending machine accidents,” says Andrew Page, senior director of The HSUS’s Wildlife Abuse Campaign.

In contrast, in the U.S., more than 33,000 black bears are killed each year by hunters, who in 32 states can legally go after them for trophies like bear heads and bearskin rugs. The animals are killed by some of the most inhumane and unsporting methods imaginable. Hunters commonly lure them with bait like soured corn or piles of garbage—old donuts and cooking grease—then shoot at point-blank range. Some states allow hunters to fit dogs with GPS collars;

after the dogs tree a bear, the hunter follows the signal to an easy, and terrified, target. In certain places it’s legal to hunt bears in the spring, when mothers’ deaths leave orphaned cubs to starve. Maine allows people to catch bears with painful wire snares and then finish them off with a pistol. South Carolina even permits people to test out dogs on tame, tethered bears who have had their claws and teeth removed; the trials take place carnival-style, in front of crowds of spectators.

Hunting has been reintroduced recently in Kentucky, New Jersey, Nevada, and Oklahoma, all states with recovering bear populations estimated by The HSUS to be below the 500-animal threshold at which—under ideal conditions—hunting does not decrease the number of bears. A California measure defeated this year would have raised the state’s black bear hunting quota to 2,000 annually from 1,700. In Colorado, a proposal to end a 19-year ban on spring bear hunting was also defeated. And in Florida, the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has begun removing the black bear from the threatened species list, a decision that could allow hunting to resume in 2012 after an 18-year ban.

The argument that it’s necessary to protect people from bears comes up all the time—in hunting blogs, in statements from fish and game departments, in NRA lobbying. The hunting industry exploits the image of life-threatening bears to justify the killing of a creature whose meat is too greasy and gamey for most people to eat. Trouble is, hunters are looking for trophy specimens, not those animals deemed “problem” or “nuisance” bears—the repeat offenders, the animals who cause property damage and alarm or injure people. And hunters are looking in the woods, where many of the bears may never have visited a backyard or broken into a home.

“Trying to reduce human-bear conflict through general hunting is like trying to reduce crime by shooting into a crowd,” says biologist Lynn Rogers of the Wildlife Research Institute in Minnesota.

The only way hunting could conceivably reduce conflicts is if it were so unregulated and widespread it decimated populations. But no one wants bears to disappear. Instead, states permit relatively small numbers to be killed in the name of keeping populations low—though those populations could adjust to the area’s carrying capacity if left alone, with females bearing more or fewer cubs and varying the age at which they reproduce.

When bait is used, legally or illegally, hunting can actually increase conflicts by teaching bears to eat human food. “Once you’ve had a Krispy Kreme, even a stale one, they taste pretty good,” says David Pauli, HSUS senior director for wildlife response. “A bear can smell things two or three miles away. If I’m walking by a town and I smell Krispy Kreme in the dumpster, and some guy has let me know what they taste like, I’m going to go in that dumpster.”

PUTTING HUMANS ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR

Beyond the fact that hunting is ineffective at reducing conflicts, the very premise that it’s needed to defend people from a dangerous species is flawed, a notion based on misunderstandings about the animal’s behavior. Contrary to common portrayals, a bear rising up on his hind legs is trying to get a better view and whiff of his surroundings, not prepare for a fight; the rare black bear mother who bluffs a charge and clacks her teeth is trying to drive off threats to her cubs, not attack.

Rather than a bloodthirsty predator, the black bear is really a conflict-averse omnivore who would prefer not to even meet up with people, let alone attack them. The animal’s nature evolved over millennia, when the species shared North America with larger, now-extinct carnivores such as saber-toothed cats and dire wolves, writes Rogers. Those black bears who hid or ran away from such predators survived to reproduce, passing on genes that make the average *Ursus americanus* anything but belligerent.

While many researchers keep their distance from bears, Rogers spends his days in the woods studying the animals up close—and in 30 years, no bear has ever harmed him. “Bears are not the ferocious

animals I once thought,” he says. “... I can put [radio] collars on bears without using tranquilizers; I can walk with them.”

Bears are predictable, says University of Calgary biologist Stephen Herrero, who has also spent a career studying them. “There’s no question that it’s possible for people and bears to coexist without serious problems if we’re willing to manage our food and garbage,” says Herrero, lead author of the study on fatal bear attacks. “... If you’re willing to [do this], the bears, they become nonentities; they start to ignore you.”

When Rutgers professor Edward Tavss went looking for evidence that hunting reduces human-bear conflicts, he couldn’t find any—not in New York, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Virginia, or Ontario. Instead, in each of those places, as hunting increased, complaints about bears also did.


What works, according to Tavss’ study, are nonviolent approaches like those used in Wintergreen, Va., combined with aversive conditioning—driving troublesome bears off. This can be done by shouting, gesturing aggressively, throwing sticks or stones or tennis balls, setting off firecrackers, putting up electrified fences, spraying animals in the face with repellent, and shooting them in the hindquarters with rubber bullets. Such treatment may not seem very nice, but it saves the lives of bears who would otherwise be killed. In places where people adopted nonviolent approaches like bear-resistant garbage containers, complaints fell markedly: Minnesota, New Jersey, Nevada, Ontario’s Elliot Lake, Juneau, Yosemite National Park.

In Yellowstone National Park, human injuries from black bears had averaged almost 50 a year from the 1930s through the 1950s, when people were leaving garbage around campsites and hand-feeding animals along the road. In 1970, the park banned that behavior and installed bear-resistant containers for garbage and food, like the \$850, 30-cubic-foot steel storage boxes now available to campers. During the last two decades, just three people have been injured by black bears (the park gets 3.6 million visitors a year).

Yellowstone visitors still do foolish things. When they see a bear in a meadow, some leave their cars and approach within 15 to 20 feet (they’re supposed to stay 100 yards away). Bear management biologist Kerry Gunther has seen as many as 100 people around a single bear, gawking. Fortunately, because food’s not involved, no one gets hurt.

Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which has 1,600 black bears (two per square mile) and more than 9 million annual visitors, follows a similar approach. At backcountry campsites, visitors use cables to hoist edibles out of reach—everything down to food-stained clothes and tubes of toothpaste. Picnic areas are closed early so staff can peel foil off grills and collect partially eaten hot dogs before nightfall. In parts of the park where natural food sources like cherry trees and deer fawns draw bears into crowded areas, rangers drive them off with paintballs and rubber buckshot.

For \$4,600 per pair, Carrie Hunt of the Wind River Bear Institute in Montana provides wildlife agencies with a means of humanely chasing bears even farther: specially selected and trained Karelian bear dogs. Developed to hunt big game, this breed is known for fearlessness, persistence, and independence. Guided by Hunt or trained



Nonviolent approaches to drive bears off include throwing tennis balls, setting off firecrackers, and spraying animals in the face with repellent. Such treatment may not seem very nice, but it saves the lives of bears who would otherwise be killed.



Specially trained Karelian bear dogs chase bears, but only to give them a scare: Once a bear ends up in a tree, the dogs are leashed and taken away, allowing the bear to escape. This male, who'd been sleeping on a porch and eating pet food from homes, was the first in Washington state to be trapped and released with the help of the dogs. At right, state fish and wildlife agents stand at the ready with rubber bullets in case the bear needs further deterrence.

agency staff, the leashed dogs tree bears in the woods. The dogs are taken off their leashes to further scare them (without making contact), then are leashed again and the bears allowed to escape.

“We teach the resident bears what the rules are: ‘This is mine, and if you cross this boundary, we’re going to chase you out, and it will hurt,’” says Hunt. “... The easiest thing for the bear to do is leave. We never ask the bear to do something that he can’t.”

Safety Tips for Black Bear Country

1. Don't place food near open windows or feed pets outdoors. Clean food scraps and grease from grills. Empty refrigerators when leaving for extended periods.
2. Keep garbage, recycled materials, compost, and pet food indoors, or use specially made bear-resistant containers. Freeze smelly leftovers and don't put trash out until garbage day.
3. Keep doors and windows locked, or locked open with a gap too small for bears. To reduce odor, spray disinfectant around doors and windows and inside trash cans.
4. Take hummingbird feeders inside at night. Hang all other types of feeders only in winter.
5. Minimize fallen fruit, weeds, overgrown grass, and other attractants of bear prey such as mice or voles. Stack firewood on pallets away from the house and remove bark, which can house bear-attracting insects.
6. Chase black bears out of your yard by shouting or throwing sticks, stones, or tennis balls. You may need to direct bear repellent (pepper spray) at the animal's face or call wildlife managers for assistance.

COURT OF LAST RESORT

As successful as the Bear Smart approach generally is, though, it has its limits, as shown by the experience of Whistler, a resort community in British Columbia near Vancouver. After the resort opened in the 1980s, Whistler quickly grew in a valley inhabited by about 100 black bears. As development marched up the hillsides, it obliterated the vegetation and berries bears once fed on. Eventually, the houses of nearly 10,000 residents overran almost all the elevations that were low and warm enough to grow plants bears eat. The result: more years when the woods didn't produce enough food and animals went hungry.

Most of Whistler's residents secure their trash and don't keep birdseed or any other foods outside. But still the bears come around in lean years; even if they've never been fed, they're not going to lie down in the woods and starve. When bears find windows or doors open or unlocked—which occurs often, no matter how much Sylvia Dolson of the Get Bear Smart Society reminds people to secure them—the animals enter houses and are subsequently killed. In 2010, when natural food was scarce, 11 hungry bears were killed. As an alternative, Dolson hopes a local wildlife management agency will temporarily feed bears away from people's homes.

Rogers and his fellow researcher Ann Bryant of the Bear League in Lake Tahoe say this type of intervention, known as diversionary feeding, may be the only way to keep bears in certain places from raiding people's fruit trees or breaking into homes when natural food runs short. At an international bear association conference in July, both presented papers showing that the next year, bears go back to eating natural food.

Rogers did his research at a U.S. Forest Service campground in Minnesota where six bears had been removed for aggressively pursuing human food. People believed someone had left out food the bears had gotten a taste for. But Rogers says hunger, not feeding, drove bears to the campsites. By giving the animals beef fat, he reduced problems at the campground by 88 percent. Conflict stayed low in 1985, when weather conditions made food especially scarce for bears in Minnesota and complaints soared across most of the state.

“You can lead bears into trouble with food,” says Rogers. “But you can also lead bears out of trouble.”

In 2007 in Lake Tahoe, a major drought and two forest fires meant no fruit, acorns, or pinecones for the valley’s 600 bears.

As many as 25 homes were broken into by hungry bears every night. The California Department of Fish and Game told Bryant’s group not to do diversionary feeding. But she and 200 volunteers did it anyway, placing apples donated by an orchard, as well as nuts and sunflower seeds, farther and farther into the woods. Immediately, the bears stopped going into homes. That winter, instead of 50 to 100 bears denning in the crawlspaces beneath people’s houses, they all found dens in the woods. The next



On Patrol

Colorado town smartens up about bears

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON



The paw prints on the back door are nearly as big as a man’s hand, even though the animal who left them is suspected of being young. Muzzle marks on the door and doorknob tell of his single-minded mission.

Thwarted by the lock but lured onward by tantalizing smells, the bear in question apparently moved around the house, testing each entry point until a small window finally gave. He popped it open, climbed through, and helped himself to the banquet in the refrigerator.

Belly full, the bear squeezed back through the window and promptly relieved his bowels a few feet from the Breckenridge vacation home—typical bear behavior after a feast, says Sean Shepherd, a Colorado Division of Wildlife district wildlife manager called to set a trap. It’s the second time the bear has broken into the house, and he’s now marked under Colorado’s two-strikes rule—whereby any bear caught more than once in a home, car, or trash is relocated from the area or euthanized. Because the juvenile is already creating problems, says Shepherd, the latter fate is likely in store.

Accompanying Shepherd, Gail Marshall walks the secluded landscape—uneven terrain dotted with lodgepole pines and insect-filled snags—in search of bear attractants. She discovers remnants of a cream cheese container the bear likely pilfered from the house, plus beer bottles strewn on the ground by construction

Bear Aware Team coordinator Gail Marshall and volunteer Debbie Sodergren help Summit County residents live harmoniously with bears. Marshall’s dog Clyde often tags along to give people a sense of bears’ size.

As new homes marched up the hillsides, they obliterated the vegetation and berries bears once fed on. The result: more years when the woods didn't produce enough food and animals went hungry.

year was the slowest on record for complaints.

Diversionary feeding is controversial and still relatively uncommon. John Hadidian, director of urban wildlife for The

HSUS, says it's an intriguing idea but must be approached with caution. "The problem is, the concept being out there, the general public is going to try it," he says. Instead, such feeding should be done only by experts—who understand bears' behavior and nutritional needs—and only if everything else has been tried and failed.

Whatever the approach, it's clear that intervention is necessary. In encroaching on land the bears once had to themselves, we've altered the natural balance and become involved in the fate of these animals. As long as our strategies involve careful, informed choices and not hunters' guns, we can live in and with the wild without having to destroy it. "It's our responsibility to solve the problem," says Bryant. "And that doesn't mean shooting all the bears." ■

workers building an addition. "Bears love bear," says Marshall with a sigh.

As coordinator of Summit County's Bear Aware Team, Marshall is at the scene to stay abreast of incidents in the area, home to four ski resorts—and 100 to 150 of Colorado's estimated 8,000 to 12,000 black bears. The information she learns from wildlife agents such as Shepherd is an invaluable teaching tool in her efforts to look out for bears in a landscape increasingly shared with people. Surrounded by the Rocky Mountains in the Upper Blue River Basin, Breckenridge was once prime bear habitat, rich with serviceberries, chokecherries, wild strawberries, and other bear favorites. The town is now home to about 3,500 permanent residents and 35,000 seasonal visitors. Much of the native vegetation has been replaced by dozens of restaurants and shops and thousands of rental condos, apartments, and homes, leaving bears vulnerable to temptation by the ready-made food sources of human society.

A Breckenridge resident since 1993, Marshall tired of hearing about unnecessary bear deaths caused by bad human practices, especially as the tourist population mushroomed. "People were moving here who didn't know how to live with wildlife," she says. Birdfeeders were left out, grills weren't cleaned, and trash was placed curbside days before pickup. Some people placed pet food outside or even fed bears for photo opportunities.

In 1998, Marshall began volunteering for the Colorado Division of Wildlife's Bear

Aware program. After learning all she could about black bears, she began setting up booths at events and enlisting volunteers to canvass neighborhoods with pamphlets and homeowner hygiene tips.

Whenever Marshall heard about neighborhoods with problem bears, she and other volunteers investigated for bear attractants. They left hangtags on offenders' doors and kept a log of homes they visited for wildlife officials. Armed with night-vision binoculars, pots and pans for noise, and popcorn to munch on, she and Bear Aware volunteer Debbie Sodergren took late-night drives in search of problem bruins, hazing them safely away from humans.

Spots on local radio and television stations and her participation in the town's annual July 4th parade have made "the bear lady" a household name among Summit

County residents. Over the years, the Bear Aware Team has played a key role in mitigating Breckenridge's human-bear conflicts. The town passed a trash ordinance requiring wildlife-resistant containers and restricting when trash can be placed outside for pickup. Community service officers ticket folks who don't comply. Secured structures for dumpsters are now commonplace throughout Breckenridge, while local trash companies sell affordable bear-resistant trash cans.

Other Colorado towns plagued by conflicts have noticed Breckenridge's efforts. Frisco and Vail implemented similar trash ordinances, while Aspen recently organized its own Bear Aware Team.

Though Summit County still has bear problems, the number is manageable despite the ongoing challenges presented by the transient community. "We've raised awareness to a point where a lot of human-bear conflicts that could potentially happen are no longer a problem," says Sodergren.

As for the case of the young bruin who fed unabashedly from the refrigerator, the education of the homeowner is still in progress. While he did place plywood over the window where the bear had broken in, Shepherd's other suggestions were largely ignored. But the man's neighbors must have been following through with a community "lockdown" in good faith: Though numerous sightings confirmed the bear's presence, he was never caught and the trap was hauled away.



At educational presentations, Marshall introduces visitors young and old to all things bear, such as prints and even parts of a skeleton.