

Be bear aware!



Photo © Mike Fontaine

Dear Sir:

We are writing to register a formal complaint against a bear whose behavior is a major nuisance at our cabin...it opened a refrigerator door, removed food, broke bottles and carried a pound of bacon upstairs to a bedroom. In the process it left mud footprints and slobber all over the refrigerator.

This is an excerpt from one of the many letters sent to the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) from frustrated homeowners pushed beyond their tolerance limits by marauding black bears.

Some letters are accompanied by photos of bear-inflicted damage to cars and homes - very graphic proof of how a bear in a kitchen can be the proverbial bull in a china shop. These unfortunate homeowners didn't necessarily cause the bear problem; in many cases they are victims of their neighbors' misdeeds.

By Lorna Bernard

Typical bear problems include cabin break-ins and late night campsite raids in search of food. Sometimes, however, the problem escalates because bears have become bold and aggressive in their quest for food. About half of the bear/public safety incidents documented in California over the last 10 years resulted from bears approaching sleeping campers - possibly in search of food.

Not everyone agrees on a course of action to address the bear problem. One homeowner writes, "Destruction of the bear, a distressing nuisance to the area, is acceptable to us. Remove the bear NOW!" Another asks DFG to capture and move the bear. Unfortunately, relocating problem bears is not a solution. The bear became a problem because someone,

Evidence of a bear's interest in the contents of a home are obvious on the window.

Photo © Mike Fontaine

either intentionally or inadvertently, fed it. Removing that food source is the only permanent, long-term solution to bear problems.

Whether you live in bear habitat or are an occasional visitor, there are steps you can take to prevent bears from being attracted to your home or campsite. The first step is to recognize that you *always* need to take precautions when you are in bear habitat. Even if you never see a bear, assume they are around. 🐻

Lorna Bernard is a researcher writer with DFG and is editor of the quarterly magazine Tracks.

Think you are bear aware? Take this test and see

Which of the following would a bear eat:

- 1) pet food
- 2) table scraps
- 3) rotten produce
- 4) bones
- 5) fruit-scented body lotion
- 6) bee hives
- 7) paper towels soaked with food grease
- 8) a baby sheep or goat
- 9) all of the above

If you answered "9) all of the above," you are on your way to becoming part of the solution to California's bear problems.



Prevention tips for residents



Bears are attracted to anything smelly or edible, especially garbage. Bears are also attracted to bee hives, orchards and gardens. Occasionally, they will kill and eat livestock. To keep your home “bear proof,” follow these guidelines:



Securely block access to potential hibernation sites, such as crawl spaces under decks or buildings.



Install bear-proof garbage and compost containers.



Request a bear-proof garbage bin for your neighborhood or apartment complex.



Deodorize garbage cans with bleach or ammonia.



Double-bag garbage to help eliminate odors.



Separate “wet garbage” and keep it in an air- and odor-tight container. Use a garbage disposal whenever possible. Freeze meat bones or other smelly items until pick-up day.



Be sure to keep barbecue grills clean.



Pick up fallen tree fruit, and put away pet food and bird feeders at night.



Close windows at night on accessible ground floors and decks.



Don't leave food in or near a window sill or on a counter near an open window.



Prevention tips for visitors

Many communities in bear habitat have “zero tolerance” policies toward people who feed bears. This includes visitors who do so unintentionally. By following a few guidelines you can be a responsible visitor and avoid getting a citation:

- Only bring the minimum amount of food and toiletries needed. Take the time to plan your meals to reduce excess food and try to choose well-sealed and less odorous food items.
- Keep a clean camp at all times, day and night, by cleaning up and storing food and garbage immediately after meals.
- Keep your cooking items clean and properly dispose of wash water and food waste away from your camping area.
- Use bear-proof garbage cans or store your garbage in a secure location with your food and toiletries whenever possible.
- Store food, toiletries and scented items in bear-proof containers, storage lockers, or in a secure location whenever possible. This may include storing items in an airtight container in your trunk or other

location out of sight in your vehicle, although no vehicle is secure from damage by a bear searching for food.

- Never keep food in your tent.
- Keep a close watch on children, and teach them what to do if they encounter a bear.
- While hiking, make noise to avoid a surprise encounter with a bear.



Photo © Jon Kinney

If you encounter a bear

Black bears are generally more docile and non-confrontational than grizzly bears, which no longer exist in California. If you encounter a black bear, give it plenty of room to pass by. Most black bears will try to avoid confrontation when given a chance.

Do not run because you cannot outrun a bear. While they may seem clumsy, bears are surprisingly fast sprinters, reaching speeds of up to 30 miles per hour. Instead, stand and face the animal. Pick up small children so that they don't panic and run. Give the bear room so that it can avoid you.

If you encounter a bear cub, do not pick it up! You run the risk of being attacked by a protective mother bear. If you think the cub is abandoned, contact the DFG. Orphaned cubs can be captured, rehabilitated and released, but only by organizations with specific authorization. People who pick up bear cubs without authorization may be cited.

If a black bear approaches



Photo © Gary Kramer

you, don't let it see you as an easy target. Make yourself appear larger - stand up, raise your arms and open your jacket. Yell at the bear, bang pots and pans or whatever objects you have with you, and create a general commotion. 🐻

If a black bear attacks

Black bear behavior is variable, but many people who have been attacked by black bears have avoided serious injury by fighting back. Throwing rocks and striking the bear with branches or other objects have been shown to be effective.

There have been fewer than 10 reported bear attacks on humans in California over the past decade. About half of the incidents involved bears that approached sleeping campers - possibly in search of food. While none of those attacks were fatal to humans, they all resulted in efforts to track and kill the offending bear.

While being a responsible resident or visitor in bear habitat takes a bit more effort, it just might prevent unruly visitors and, in the long run, save the life of a bear. 🐻

