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MDC encourages people to Be Bear Aware!

MARCH 20TH 2017 BY DEE LOFLIN

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Don't feed bears. Avoid encounters. React right.

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. - As blossoms and buds emerge each spring, so do Missouri's estimated 300 native black bears. As they leave their winter dens this time of year, finding food is their main focus. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) reminds people to "Be Bear Aware" by not feeding bears and not providing potential sources of food.

“As black bears become active in the spring, they are on a mission to find food,” said Laura Conlee, a resource scientist and black-bear researcher with MDC. “It is very important for Missourians to recognize potential food attractants in their area. Things such as bird feeders, trash, barbeque grills, and food waste left out at camp sites can all serve as huge attractions for bears. Keeping our areas free of attractants, and letting bears find natural foods is in everyone’s best interest. If you see a bear, enjoy the sighting, let the bear be, and be sure you don’t offer it any food. Most importantly, never intentionally feed them.”

Conlee added feeding bears makes them comfortable around people, which can also make them dangerous.

A FED BEAR IS A DEAD BEAR

"When bears lose their fear of people, they may approach people in search of food or may defend the food sources or territory they associate with people, which can make them dangerous," Conlee said. "When this happens, the bear has to be destroyed. A fed bear is a dead bear."

She added a fed bear that becomes a problem in one place cannot be relocated to another.

"Once a bear learns people can provide food, they will seek out other places such as camp sites, residential areas, and farms in search of food," she explained. "Bears also have an excellent memory and will often return year after year to places where they were provided food."

AVOID ATTRACTING BLACK BEARS

MDC offers these tips for avoiding attracting black bears to possible food sources:

Don't leave pet food sitting outside. Feed pets a portion they'll eat at each meal and remove the empty containers.

Store garbage, recyclables, and compost inside a secure building or in a bear-proof container until the day of trash pick-up.

Keep grills and smokers clean and store them inside.

Don't use birdfeeders from April through November in bear country, or hang them at least 10 feet high and 4 feet away from any structure.

Use electric fencing to keep bears away from beehives, chicken coops, vegetable gardens, orchards, and other potential food sources.

Keep campsites clean and store all food, toiletries and trash in a secure vehicle or strung high between two trees. Do not burn or bury garbage or food waste.

AVOID ENCOUNTERS AND REACT RIGHT

While close encounters are uncommon, MDC offers this advice when outdoors in black-bear country:

Make noise while walking or hiking to prevent surprising a bear. Clap, sing, or talk loudly.

Travel in a group if possible.

Pay attention to the surroundings and watch for bear sign, such as tracks or claw or bite marks on trees.

Keep dogs leashed.

Leave a bear alone! Do not approach it. Make sure it has an escape route.

If encountering a bear up close, back away slowly with arms raised to look larger. Speak in a calm, loud voice. Do not turn away from the bear. Back away slowly. Do not run. A native to Missouri, black bears were abundant until the late 1800s when they were nearly wiped out from unregulated killing and from habitat loss when Ozark forests were logged. MDC research shows that a small number of native black bears survived. Over time, their numbers increased and continue to do so. Results of ongoing black-bear research by MDC staff and others show that the animals have been sighted in about half the counties in Missouri, primarily south of the Missouri River, with most bears located in the southern third of the state in the Missouri Ozarks.

Black bears are a protected species in Missouri. MDC anticipates a limited hunting season as a population-management method once black bear numbers reach a population estimate of about 500 animals. The current estimate is about 300. No details regarding the anticipated future hunting season have been developed.

MDC asks people to report bear sightings by calling 573-522-4115, ext. 3080.

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