

## BLACK BEARS (*Ursus americanus*) in NE Georgia and Sylvan Lake Falls

This document was developed from several documents Cathy Warren collected and transcribed over the years.

### BEAR SAFETY

#### 1. NEVER APPROACH A BEAR.

Make sure the bear has an escape route. If the bear will not leave, retreat to your house, car or building so that the bear can leave when it feels safe. Bears are naturally afraid of humans and prefer to be left alone. Normally they are eating, traveling, searching for food, watching cubs protectively, or resting. Bears are territorial and protective of their food source and young cubs. They may demonstrate a false charge or emit groans telling you to move on. Don't think you can sneak in on a mother bear or her cub for a rare photo; mother bears will become aggressive if they perceive any possible threat to their cubs.

#### 2. IF YOU SEE A BEAR:

- DON'T RUN AND DON'T PLAY DEAD

They will perceive you as prey and natural predatory behavior will take over. Make noise. Bears respond to audible confrontation and will often make noises to warn of their disapproval.

- DON'T CLIMB A TREE: Black Bears are great climbers.
- DON'T PANIC: Panic may alarm the bear into an aggressive defense.
- DON'T feed or toss food to a bear or any wild animal.
- DON'T surround or corner a bear.
- DON'T approach a bear ever. They can be dangerous and are unpredictable.
- DO Keep children and pets close at hand.
- DO Stand still and tall. Back away slowly facing the bear. Elevate arms and wave around.
- DO Keep pets indoors or inside a vehicle or camper.

Otherwise, keep dogs on a leash. Dogs will confront bears and may become seriously injured due to the bear's strength, long curved claws, and sharp teeth.

- DO Encourage others to follow all safety instructions when they are in your presence.
- DO Act responsibly. Irresponsible behavior on your part may cause a bear to die or a human to be seriously injured.
- DO Fight back with anything at hand if a bear attacks you. Act aggressively and intimidate the bear by yelling and waving your arms.

### 3. SCARE TACTICS THAT HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVE:

- Banging pots and pans
- Blowing air horns or police whistles
- Loud shouting and clapping of hands
- Other loud noises or actions that might elicit a retreat response
- *When the bear is retreating* discontinue scare tactics

4. Avoid attracting bears, to your property especially if you ever have children or pets visit the property.

Secure garbage. Avoid having pet food outside. Avoid bird feeders. Alternatively, bring bird feeders in a night. If you compost, use bear proof containers.

## MORE BEAR FACTS AND ADDITIONAL CAUTIONARY ADVICE

- **STANDING BEARS ARE NOT NECESSARILY PREPARING TO CHARGE**

Bears are nearsighted, and they may be trying to identify scents and sights. Charging bears remain on all fours with the heads down and perform a series of mock attacks usually before running away to avoid conflict.

- **A BEAR'S SENSE OF SMELL IS BETTER THAN A BLOODHOUND'S**

They will likely detect your presence before you see them, and they will avoid you if they can. (See DOs and DON'Ts of Bear Safety)

- **BLACK BEARS CAN RUN As Fast AS 30 MILES AND HOUR**
- **WHEN HIKING BE AWARE OF BEAR SIGNS AND ATTRACTORS**

Bear signs and attractors may include overturned rocks, berry patches, bee hives, and nut-bearing trees. Large rotted logs, rock overhangs and shallow caves can be possible dens. Bears are normally quiet and may be close; they don't make a lot of noise unless confronted.

- **WHEN CAMPING**

Keep all food suspended from a tree limb well above ground and away from the tree trunks and away from your tents and gear. Food smells from cook fires can leave odors on your belongings attracting a bear's curiosity. Camping gear or utensils not stored in a tent should also be hung up or stored in a nearby vehicle. Sleep in your tent, camper, trailer or RV. Do not sleep under the stars. If you wake up startled by a bear, your awakening will startle the bear as well.

- **BLACK BEARS ARE BEAUTIFUL NATURAL CREATURES AND NOT PETS**

If they seem friendly, they're likely just looking for a handout. As calmly as possible, let them know they're not welcome. From a safe distance, calmly raise your arms over your head and wave them and make some noise. Don't act too aggressively as that might provoke some bears.

For further information or to report problematic bears: Call the **GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES**, Gainesville, GA, 770-535-5700

### LIVING WITH THE BLACK BEARS

Bears prefer solitude in the wilderness. The presence of the Black Bear today is significantly greater than it was 30 to 40 years ago. Before the establishment of the Great Smokey Mountains National Park (an hour from SLF), there were only 200 Black Bears inhabiting the national park region, due to logging and over hunting. The creation of the national park allowed the wild bears an opportunity to live a more natural existence in the wilderness.

Due to better wildlife planning and greater garbage control, today the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has a population of more than 1,500 wild Black Bears. The present thriving population is a result of the sound management of bears and bear habitat. State and Federal agencies have developed bear-proof lids and several bear-proof dumpsters. Regulations prohibiting feeding bears are strictly enforced within the national forest and national and state parks. No longer do most Black Bears root through garbage cans and "beg" for handouts with the exception of a small minority living near the outer fringes of the parklands and, thus, closer to civilization. It is proving difficult to break their bad habits.

Black Bears who find themselves in the close proximity of civilization subject themselves to greater harm from unhealthy food sources, irate or startled humans, poachers, and vehicle collisions. For such reasons the Black Bear population is again on the decline. It is the responsibility of both the wildlife resource agencies and the general public who live near or visit the bears' wilderness regions to practice bear safety and to maintain a proper relationship between bears and humans.

### **WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO BEAR AND HUMAN CONFLICT?**

If they find human food sources often enough, bears become habituated to them. Such habituated bears lose their fear of humans and become a threat to people, property, and themselves. In spite of efforts to protect them, bears are dying unnecessarily due to the improper disposal of garbage in campgrounds, picnic areas, residential neighborhoods, businesses, and dumpsites.

Such habituated bears may become more night-active and develop patterns of behavior that often ends with their deaths. Bears that become day-active in developed areas put themselves in even greater danger. They might be killed by a car or truck, ingest toxic material from garbage, and/or risk being trapped and relocated if they become troublesome.

Bear's that habituate to humans and human related food are a **CHRONIC PROBLEM**, especially in heavily used recreation areas. Habituated bears cause property damage and injure numerous visitors. Yet, the main victims of human-bear conflict have been the bears.

Rangers formerly carried shotguns loaded with the birdshot to frighten habituated bears without causing permanent injury. Recent management practices have included trapping and relocation. Some relocated bears readapt to the wild while other such bears use their amazing sense of smell and homing ability to return to the developed area they knew so well. Often, the relocated Black Bears face conflict with resident bears in their new environment. According to wildlife agencies, relocation is a last resort for rehabilitating a habituated Black Bear.

In recent years, wildlife agencies have adopted innovative bear management strategies that emphasize problem prevention rather than relocation. Public education and cooperation are essential priorities in these programs. More attention is given to keeping picnic areas and campgrounds completely free of food scraps and garbage, especially at night. As a last resort, day-active bears are trapped and released nearby, rather than relocated.

So far the new efforts appear to be successful when management methods are used consistently. The number of bears requiring relocation or euthanasia has decreased significantly.

Many *Bear/Human conflict problems can be resolved* through simple actions such as removing easily accessible birdfeeders, avoiding leaving pet food outdoors, and storing garbage in an area inaccessible to bears. When camping or hiking, store food items in a vehicle or hoist food packs into the air away from the trunks of trees. It may take several days for a nuisance bear to learn there's no longer a free meal available, but it will learn and move along.

Left alone, young bears searching for territory will usually find their way back to more traditional range deep in the mountain forest where they find safety from humans and where humans are safe from startled bears. There are very few bear attacks on record though reports of mauling and mortalities occur and that is why BEAR SAFETY EDUCATION is important for all who enjoy the Mountains.

### FACTS ABOUT BEARS IN NE GEORGIA

Bears may weigh as much as 300-500 pounds. They have large canine teeth designed to rip open insect-ridden logs and carrion (dead animals), and they possess tightly curved claws which allow them to dig into the earth. Bears climb trees with ease, and an adult bear can easily kill a human.

Long associated with woodland folk lore and tall tales, Black Bears have often been portrayed as Villains of the forests. While the bear has the power and intelligence to overpower a human, such is relatively rare. However, statistics show at least a dozen deaths have been attributed to Black Bears in North America since 2000. The incidents closest to NE Georgia occurred in Tennessee. This does not include the people who were attacked and injured ([www.southeasternoutdoors.com](http://www.southeasternoutdoors.com)). Human behavior with bears is potentially more dangerous to the bear than its behavior is to us. A bear's best defense is NOT its large teeth, curved claws, or ability to run 30 mph. Its best defense is its natural fear of humans. When that natural fear is altered, the bear become vulnerable.

Mike Brod, a field biologist with the USDA Forest Service, Chattooga River Ranger district, Clayton, GA, says that "... our region is a prime place to see bears. About 1,200 Black Bears are estimated to live in North Georgia, a region extending south to Athens, north to North Carolina, and west to Gilmer County, and east to South Carolina. The Black Bears are plentiful here because of our hardwood forests...[which]... provide berries, acorns, and fallen trees containing insects and grubs. In addition, there is always carrion ... another major source of food. However,

when food supplies dwindle in forest area, the bears, which are opportunistic feeders, venture closer to civilized areas in search of a meal. That may include garbage cans, bird feeders and backyard grills ....This can spell trouble for bears and humans alike."

Scott Frazier, a 13-year veteran with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in Gainesville, agrees: "Bears are intelligent animals that are very easily trained to a food source. Once they have been fed either intentionally or unintentionally by humans in a particular area, they are not easily discouraged from returning again and again. Sometimes, either through improper disposal of garbage or intentional feeding, bears can become a nuisance in residential areas. Because of their size, bears can do a lot of damage when foraging. In such cases, the DNR often is called in to remove or relocate the bear."

"When this happens, the bear is tranquilized, a small tooth is removed to determine the age and a metal identification tag is placed on the ear. That bear is then taken to another wilderness area for release. If a bear shows continuing nuisance behavior that cannot be discouraged or reversed or exhibits aggressive behavior that is repeatedly observed at a picnic area in one of the parks, it may have to be destroyed."

"Although bears are understandably fascinating to watch, encouraging them with food to approach a residence or campsite in order to observe their behavior or for the purpose of taking photographs puts the animals and humans at risk. Up close, they become more easily accessible to poachers and hunters, and, while foraging in garbage, a bear may ingest something toxic. After all, the bear does not know the difference by smell between hamburgers and the aluminum foil in which they were cooked. According to literature provided by the DNR, the bottom line is:

**"FEEDING BEARS KILLS BEARS."**

Educating the public is the best defense for humans and bears. It is wise not to attract bears to your home, so that they don't become a neighborhood nuisance and have to be relocated.

### **Useful websites:**

<http://www.georgiawildlife.com/node/1390>

<http://www.theblueridgehighlander.com/Black-Bears-of-the-Blue-Ridge-Smoky-Mountains/Black-Bear-Safety-and-Avoiding-Bear-Human-Conflict/index.php>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_black\\_bear](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_black_bear)

<http://www.defenders.org/black-bear/basic-facts>

<http://www.bear.org/website/live-cameras/slide-shows/black-bear-show.html>