



Learning to Live with Bears

WILDLIFE AGENCIES USE EDUCATION, OUTREACH AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO ADDRESS HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICTS

By Colleen Olfenbuttel, Garrett Heath and Ashley Hobbs

Over the past few years, the Bitterroot Valley of western Montana has seen its first signs of grizzly bears since they were extirpated in the mid-1900s. With these appearances have come—in rare circumstances—conflicts with humans. People have experienced broken fences, overturned trash cans, preyed-upon poultry and damaged property.

conflict situations. A collaborative group led by a master's student from the University of Montana and representatives from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wind River Bear Institute is working to address these concerns and inform residents on how to stay safe around bears, report bear conflicts and prevent potential damages.

It's one of a growing number of efforts taking place across the country to reduce conflicts with bears and help people coexist with growing bear populations.

▼ The Wind River Bear Institute uses dogs trained for situations of human-wildlife conflict to demonstrate safe food storage techniques.

The recent grizzly sightings have sparked a wave of discussion and concern involving bears and the preventative actions that could be used to mitigate



Credit: The Wind River Bear Institute



Due largely to protections afforded them under the Endangered Species Act, grizzlies (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) have been growing in number and expanding their range across western Montana for the past few decades.

To help residents avoid conflicts with the bears, the collaborative group has hosted multiple outreach events in community centers and libraries throughout the valley, presenting information in the style of town hall meetings and allowing for discussions between concerned residents and local, state and federal managers.

Outreach events begin with presentations by the USFWS and Montana FWP on the status of bears in the region and the movement of grizzlies into the Bitterroot Valley and how residents can report bear incidents. They also share safe mitigation strategies, such as limiting food sources for bears, keeping trash cans locked and techniques like electrified fences and “unwelcome mats”—chain-link mats that mildly shock a bear’s paws.

Next, the Wind River Bear Institute performs a skit portraying a model property with attractants for bears. A member dresses as a bear, “finding” all the attractants and, in the process, damaging the property. Then, two bear dog handlers use their dogs to chase away the “bear.” The skit demonstrates some of the items that can be considered bear attractants, how to properly store them, and how to install bear-proof containers, trash cans and fences.

The event concludes with a casual meet-and-greet of the local bear managers and the bear dogs and a discussion of programs that can help fund many of the mitigation products and strategies. Bear dogs are great ambassadors for encouraging public engagement and conversations on human-bear conflicts. They are a hit with the public, particularly with children and college students, many of whom attend the events just to see the dogs at work.

Becoming BearWise

The Bitterroot Valley is hardly alone in dealing with a growing bear presence close to where people live. In much of the United States, black bears are becoming a more common sight, increasing the need for strategies to coexist with them. Their populations have grown tremendously in much of their



Credit: Melissa McGaw/North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

North American range, including the southeastern U.S., where the human population is also on the rise. From 2010 to 2020, the Southeast grew faster than any other region in the country.

▲ A sign being installed in Highlands, North Carolina, promotes the town as a recognized BearWise Community.

As human and bear numbers have grown, state wildlife agencies have been spending an increasing amount of their limited resources responding to human-bear conflicts. These efforts include education, but the work is never done. Given the



mobility of our modern-day society, managers face a constantly changing residential population, creating something of a moving target for educational efforts in any given state.

As a result, in 2018, the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies launched **BearWise**, a regional outreach effort to provide science-based resources and communicate consistent and effective messaging about how to live responsibly with American black bears (*Ursus americanus*). This cooperative approach to brand messaging about human-bear coexistence was elevated in 2022 when BearWise became a national program under the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. With its national expansion, the program is also incorporating information about coexisting with grizzly bears.

BearWise encourages residents, businesses and communities to take proactive actions to avoid

conflicts with bears. Some states, including North Carolina, are adopting formal recognition programs for BearWise communities, whether they are neighborhoods, towns, businesses, college campuses or outdoor recreation areas. These communities commit to securing attractants by formerly implementing common-sense precautions—known as “BearWise Basics”—and serving as ambassadors of BearWise education to their communities. The North Carolina program provides a framework for community members to change their own behavior, ultimately prompting a change in the bears’ behavior and a reduction in human-bear interactions.

The process for achieving recognition is straightforward and adaptable. Typically, a community requests assistance from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission after experiencing increased human-bear interactions. Community representatives meet with a commission biologist to discuss current practices, identify attractants and propose actions to secure them. Since garbage is a main attractant for bears, it’s important to keep garbage stored where bears can’t access it. Communities can commit to keeping garbage secure in a shed or garage until the morning of collection day or require approved bear-resistant garbage carts tested by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee or the SEAFWA Black Bear-Resistant Products Testing Program.

While “gold standards,” such as homeowners association rules or municipal ordinances requiring secured attractants—including taking down bird feeders and using bear-resistant garbage carts—are ideal, flexibility is key to eliciting broader participation. However, there can be challenges to recognition, including income disparities, a lack of unifying structures like an HOA and residents’ varying willingness to change their behavior. As such, the goal is to work with these communities to find a compromise with which most of the community can comply while still following the BearWise Basics. Once the changes are implemented, the community is expected to enforce the changes in perpetuity and serve as an ambassador for BearWise practices. If the community is following the agreed-upon requirements, they become officially recognized as BearWise, receive their own BearWise recognition signs and are acknowledged on ncwildlife.org/bearwise.

▼ **Patrick Hanrahan, with TrashLockers.com, installs a retrofit product on a city garbage cart to have it tested with captive black bears.**



Credit: Colleen Olfenbuttel/North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission



Credit: Colleen Olfenbuttel/North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

A commission biologist will provide community support and conduct an annual compliance check.

The commission is particularly proud of the town of Highlands, which became the first town in the United States recognized as a BearWise Community. In 2018, Highlands Mayor Patrick Taylor and the Bear Education and Resources Task Force attended a BearWise introductory meeting in Asheville. Their interest in BearWise was the result of bears attempting entry into homes and interacting with pets in town. After the meeting, the mayor started work to implement an ordinance requiring the use of bear-resistant garbage carts and required commercial and street garbage carts downtown to be replaced with bear-resistant receptacles. Town officials then requested the assistance of commission biologists to create an ordinance requiring

residents to secure attractants to fulfill the remaining BearWise community requirements. Since enacting the garbage and attractant ordinances in early 2021, the mayor is reporting a reduction in calls concerning bears to local law enforcement and sanitation officials. Highlands has become the “gold standard” for BearWise communities in North Carolina and beyond.

Securing attractants

One of the key messages of BearWise is to secure attractants. However, implementation can be challenging due to the limited number of proven black bear-resistant products available on the market—even though black bears reside in 41 of the 50 states. While the IGBC has a widely recognized program to test bear-resistant products using captive grizzly bears, it is unknown

▲ Uno, a black bear at the Western North Carolina Nature Center, tries to access a garbage cart to help determine if it is black bear-resistant.



whether their testing protocols are applicable to black bears, as there are physical and behavioral differences. Claw structure differences, for example, may allow black bears to access a product through manipulation rather than using a grizzly's approach of using brute strength. In addition, many of the commercially available IGBC bear-resistant products are either unaffordable or not locally available. As a result, state wildlife biologists are reporting an increase in the public experimenting with homemade retrofits, such as using ratchet straps to secure trash can lids. Some small manufacturers are selling retrofits online with claims that their invention is inexpensive, easy to install and will make an ordinary product black bear-resistant. However, these retrofits have not been formally tested.

In 2020, the SEAFWA Black Bear-Resistant Products Testing Program was created to identify black bear-resistant products—including garbage carts, coolers, dumpsters, backpacking canisters and retrofits—to aid in minimizing conflicts between people and black bears. Because areas that have wild hogs (*Sus scrofa*) are seeing an increasing interest in using toxicant delivery devices to control their populations, the program also field tests these devices—using non-toxicant bait—to identify black-bear resistant designs.

This program is governed by a committee of SEAFWA-appointed individuals, composed largely of state wildlife agency biologists. It is administered by the Wildlife Management Institute, which also administers the IGBC's testing program. Products submitted for testing are either tested by captive black bears at an approved testing facility, like the Brevard Zoo in Florida, or in the field. The type of testing depends on the product type. For a product to pass the captive-bear test, it must withstand 60 minutes of direct contact, including rolling, clawing, biting and pouncing. A product will fail if the black bear can break into it or if it does not function properly after testing.

The SEAFWA program has also allowed other facilities, such as the Western North Carolina Nature Center, to become pre-testing grounds, where manufacturers can experiment with their product on captive black bears, allowing them to discover deficiencies and identify design improvements before formally submitting their product

to the SEAFWA program. The captive black bears also benefit by having an additional enrichment opportunity that often leads to a reward.

Seven products have passed SEAFWA's testing program since it formally began in the fall of 2022, including an affordable retrofit to secure lids of polycart trash cans. Manufacturers are increasingly supportive of the program due to the ease and low cost of shipping their product to the testing facility and the expanded market for their products, as black bears are found in most of the United States and Canada. With increasing black bear populations and ranges resulting in growing numbers of human-black bear interactions, more state and federal agencies and municipalities are requiring the public to use black bear-resistant products on public lands or at their homes and businesses.

All of these bear programs demonstrate innovative tactics employed to address modern-day challenges of wildlife management and conservation. These programs exemplify the principles of wildlife damage management—using integrated approaches to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts through a variety of humane methods that are cost-effective and safe.

The success of these programs means people and bears can continue to coexist, maintaining public support for these large mammals remaining and thriving on the landscape. ■



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