

A black bear cub is the central focus of the image, clinging to a tree trunk. The cub's dark, shaggy fur is a deep black, and its large, rounded ears are prominent. Its eyes are a light brown color, and it has a small, dark nose. The cub's paws are visible, gripping the rough bark of the tree. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a forest setting. The text "BEARS, BEARS EVERYWHERE" is overlaid on the bottom half of the image in a large, white, serif font.

BEARS, BEARS EVERYWHERE

*by Steve Kemp
Photos by Bill Lea*

If it seems like there are more black bears than usual roaming about, your intuition is correct. Bear populations are hitting new highs in our region. The reasons why are complex, yet the moment presents a tantalizing opportunity for humans to redefine their place in the natural world.



“WE KNEW THIS WAS COMING,” said Colleen Olfenbittel, black bear and furbearer biologist for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

“This” is lots and lots of black bears. In Cades Cove, Asheville, Knoxville, Seymour, Gatlinburg—everywhere. If you hadn’t noticed the bumper crop of bears before, the viral videos and social media posts of bears wandering through downtown Asheville, ransacking cars outside rental cabins, and even streaking across the football field at Gatlinburg-Pittman High School—in broad daylight—have vividly driven the message home.

“We certainly have more bears in the park right now than we’ve had in a long, long time,” said Joe Clark, a wildlife biologist for the US Geological Survey in Knoxville. The last time Clark and his colleagues with the Southern Appalachian Black Bear Study Group counted bears was in 2018, and their tally was 1,900, just in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “There could be more now,” Clark added, “the trend is upward.”

“Bears are more prolific now than I’ve seen in my entire career,” said Bill Stiver, long-time supervisory wildlife biologist for the park. “They’re behind Food City in Seymour, they’re outside elementary schools. Not just here but in Florida, New Jersey, and Michigan, too.”

In the mountains of Western North Carolina, outside the national park, Olfenbittel and her cohorts estimate there are at least 8,000 black bears. The bear study group believes some 5,500 bears now live in the East Tennessee mountains beyond park borders. Altogether, that’s a whopping 15,400 bears in the mountains of East

Tennessee and Western North Carolina, nearly equal to the black bear population in the entire state of Colorado.

Prior to the 1970s, officials estimated 50 to 300 bears lived in the national park. By the 1980s and ’90s, researchers from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and the National Park Service put the population at 400 to 600. In 2006, biologists raised the park bear population estimate to nearly 1,600. Outside the park, just in the western 24 counties of North Carolina, the bear population has almost doubled since 2012.

CHANGES OVER TIME

Bear experts concur the main reason for the bear boom is time. “Bears are a wildlife success story,” said Olfenbittel. “In the 1950s and ’60s, only small pockets of bears remained in the state [North Carolina].” According to a report by Clark and Jacob Humm in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*, “Black bears were considered rare in many parts of the Southern Appalachian region until as late as the 1970s.” As a boy, Clark recalled “hiking around in the Smokies when even seeing a bear track was rare. The bear population came back from such a low number, it’s taken a long time to reach the level they are at now.”

From a bear’s perspective, the landscape of the national park and surrounding environs has improved immensely over the last 70 years. “The landscape looks very different from when bears were almost extirpated,” Olfenbittel said. “The mountains weren’t covered with forest back then.”



BEARS ARE AMAZING!

- Their noses are seven times more sensitive than a bloodhound's.
- They can sprint up to 35 miles per hour.
- They can live into their 20s.
- They hibernate from late fall to early spring. They recycle their waste, give birth to cubs, and heal their wounds during this period.



Within the national park, “the habitat is good. The forest is getting older,” Clark said. Yet, “there may be better habitat outside the park where there is more ecosystem diversity. We know from our research that most park bears spend some of their time outside the park.”

Hunting regulations have changed dramatically over time as well. “Until the 1930s,” Olfenbuttel said, “there were no game laws for most wildlife, including bears.”

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

Another factor in the bear boom is peoples’ evolving attitudes toward bears. Prior to the establishment of Great

Smoky Mountains National Park in 1934, most people were farmers, and their family’s survival depended on protecting their livestock and crops. There was zero tolerance for bears rummaging around the farm back then. The large quantity of meat a bear could provide was also a major windfall for families who lived from field and forest to fork.

Today, bears don’t play a major role in most families’ livelihoods. “I think people aren’t killing bears in their backyards like they used to 20 or 30 years ago,” Stiver said. “We’re more tolerant of bears than ever before.”

Bear hunting continues to be a popular activity in the

southern mountains. Outside the national park, the harvest of bears by hunters is gradually increasing. Over the last 15 years in the western counties of North Carolina, the bear harvest has grown by more than 70 percent. In fact, harvest numbers in the North Carolina mountains have hit records lately, peaking at 1,468 bears in 2022.

The rise in harvest numbers no doubt reflects the growing number of bears. Yet, as one can assume from the continued uptick in the bear population, the number of bears killed by hunters isn't making a serious dent overall. One reason is hunter selectivity: bear hunters often prefer taking male bears, but it's females that drive population growth. Other factors include wildlife managers' fine tuning of hunting seasons and creating restrictions on practices like taking female bears with cubs. Dan Gibbs, bear program leader for Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and chair of a national program to reduce human-bear conflicts called BearWise®, estimates that today, in East Tennessee, 12 to 15 percent of the bear population is harvested each year. "You would have to take 20 percent or more to impact sustainability," he said.

BEARS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

One of the lesser-known contributors to the bear boom is what Olfenbuttel calls "mini bear sanctuaries." These include state and local parks, cities, towns, and neighborhoods (some gated) where hunting is discouraged or prohibited. Bears roam freely in such environs and often find large quantities of human-provided (anthropogenic) foods: garbage, pet food, scraps on barbecue grills, and bird seed. Lots and lots of bird seed. "I tell people that bears don't know they're bird feeders," Olfenbuttel said. "They just assume they're bear feeders."

The combination of increased areas with no hunting and abundant anthropogenic food gives a powerful boost to the already proliferating bruin population. "We are documenting that the availability of anthropogenic foods is influencing reproduction," Olfenbuttel said. "Females are having cubs at two years old, rather than at the usual four years of age."

Bears are also consistently birthing more cubs: up to five rather than the normal one to three. Bear biologists have long known that natural food abundance, such as acorns and berries, influences reproduction. It's nature's highly efficient way of regulating bear populations. But increasingly, "bears are becoming disconnected from changes in natural food abundance due

to the availability of anthropogenic foods," Olfenbuttel said, "resulting in several mountain communities literally growing more bears."

"People are creating an endless buffet for bears," said Linda Masterson, marketing and communications director for BearWise. "That's the crux of the problem."

Anthropogenic foods are creating other side effects as well. "Some bears in the mountains, including females with yearlings, aren't even hibernating anymore," Olfenbuttel said. Hibernation among black bears is also known to be tied to food availability. Retreating to the winter den is more a reaction to food scarcity than cold weather. But with anthropogenic foods readily

Bears are becoming more prolific in the Smokies region, a product of time and improving habitat as well as more tolerance by humans towards bears in their backyards. Female bears are also becoming mothers at a younger age and are birthing more cubs at a time, up to five rather than the usual one to three.



WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I SEE A BEAR?

IN A BUILDING, BY A DUMPSTER, OR AROUND THE CORNER

- Give the bear a clear escape route (*do not corner it*).
- Leave any doors open as you back away from the bear.
- Do not lock the bear in a room.

IN MY BACKYARD

- From a safe distance, make loud noises, shout, or bang pots and pans together to scare away the bear.
- When the bear leaves, remove potential attractants such as garbage, bird seed, or pet food.
- Ask neighbors to remove attractants.
- Check your yard for bears before letting out your dog.

IN THE WOODS

- Stay alert and keep your group together.
- If you see a bear before it notices you: stand still, don't approach, and enjoy the moment. Then move away quietly in the opposite direction.
- If you encounter a bear that's aware of you: don't run; running may trigger a chase response. Back away slowly in the opposite direction and wait for the bear to leave.

WITH MY DOG IN THE NATIONAL PARK

- You must keep your dog on a leash no longer than six feet at all times.
- Carry bear spray and know how to use it: It works from 30 feet away.
- Stay alert; music and phones are distracting.
- Do not let your dog bark at, harass, chase, or corner a bear.
- If your dog gets into a fight with a bear, don't rescue it. You will get injured. Use bear spray.
- Two short walking paths permit dogs—the Gatlinburg Trail and the Oconaluftee River Trail. Pets are not allowed on any other park trails.

PLEASE REMEMBER:

Bears will protect their food and defend their cubs.

Bears don't like to be cornered.

If your dog runs after a bear, it may bring the bear back to you.

available, there is one less excuse to spend the whole winter napping.

THE PEOPLE PROBLEM

Everyone involved with bear management in the region agrees that the gradual, century-long recovery in the bear population is a monumental wildlife success story. They also agree that the bear population should not be encouraged to expand indefinitely.

"We used to be in the business of restoring bears, now we want to stabilize population growth," Olfenbittel said. She sees some liberalization of hunting regulations in North Carolina, such as a longer season, as one possible tool to achieve a plateau in the bear population. "We'd rather see bears taken by hunters, who then utilize the meat, than killed in vehicle collisions," she added.

Clark similarly believes that "we may have reached a carrying capacity for bears in the region. Or at least the maximum number of bears that humans can tolerate."

The human population of the region has boomed right alongside the bears. "The number of residents in Sevier County, Tennessee [includes Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, and Sevierville], has doubled in the last 30 years," said Stiver. Across the mountain, "North Carolina is one of the fastest growing states in the country," Olfenbittel said. "There are a record number of people hiking, camping, viewing wildlife, and otherwise enjoying the outdoors." Visits to Great Smoky Mountains National Park have surged from 9.3 million in 2013 to around 13 million in 2023.

"Bears are becoming bolder," Olfenbittel said. "They are forcibly entering occupied homes." The problem isn't necessarily that we have too many bears in the region, "it's that you have generation after generation of bears that are not exposed to hunting and, conversely, are being rewarded for being around people and homes with unsecured attractants, such as bird feeders and garbage."



Letting your dog off leash in the campground or the woods is usually illegal and always dangerous. It may be tempting to let your dog run free, but don't put your dog and yourself at risk. **PLEASE, LEASH UP.**



Learn More:



BearWise.org

"We've seen more bear conflicts this year [2023] statewide than we've ever seen," Gibbs said. Research by the bear study group confirms the number of human–bear conflicts in the southern mountains has risen from around 500 per year in 1993 to some 4,500 today. Bears entering both locked and unlocked vehicles with visible food or coolers have become almost common in the Gatlinburg area, sometimes resulting in irreparable damage to the automobiles. Occasionally, a family staying in a rental cabin near the Smokies will be awakened by a bear rifling through their kitchen cabinets. Since 2020, one person has been killed, and five have been injured by bears in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and along the Asheville section of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Still, bear-caused injuries to humans are very, very rare, especially when you consider the densities of both bear and humans in our area.

The burgeoning bear and human populations are reflected in the workloads of the area's wildlife biologists, as well. "The number of human–bear conflicts is way up," Stiver said. "We handle more bears every year [in the Smokies] than do the wildlife staffs in Yosemite, Yellowstone, and Sequoia national parks combined." One population that hasn't seen a big increase is the number of state and federal wildlife biologists working with bears. "Hopefully some of the new parking fee revenue will help us increase our staff," Stiver said.

To put it plainly, biologists say we have a people problem, not a bear problem. "In some cases, people are rewarding bears for approaching them, as they are purposely feeding them in their backyards or from their porches," Olfenbittel said. "These bears are losing their natural wariness of people, and so we have an increase in conflicts that puts both humans and bears at risk."

According to Gibbs, "an estimated 80 percent of human–bear conflicts can be traced back to garbage and poor management of garbage. It always seems to start with bears in trash cans."

And while bears that consume anthropogenic foods may grow larger and have more cubs, they aren't necessarily healthier bears. "They have evolved with a very diverse, seasonal diet," Olfenbittel said. "Eating mostly sunflower seeds probably isn't good for them. Research shows that bears eating anthropogenic foods have lower diversity in their gut biome, which might compromise their immune systems and have other

MAKE MY HOME BearWise

- Never feed or approach bears.
- Secure food, garbage, and recycling.
- Never leave pet food outdoors.
- Remove bird feeders when bears are active.
- Clean and store grills and smokers.
- Alert neighbors to bear activity.

Much more information is available at [BearWise.org](https://www.bearwise.org).



HELP KIDS LEARN TO BE BearWise

Mabel Meets a Black Bear is a charmingly illustrated rhyming book for ages five to ten that addresses the perils of feeding black bears. It was born from "the dire need to better educate tourists staying in rental cabins who often arrive in the Smokies hoping to see bears but with no understanding that leaving food and trash available to bears can end in their demise," said Frances Figart, the book's author and the creative services director for Smokies Life. "The main lesson kids (and their adults) need to learn is that, when bears become food conditioned due to human behavior, they can end up hurting humans (often by accident), which then leaves wildlife managers no choice but to destroy them."

Mabel includes a bonus educational back section by several partner agencies that educates children about how to be BearWise®. Written by Frances Figart, illustrated by Jesse White. Smokies Life \$10.99



As black bear numbers have increased alongside human populations in the Smokies region, the health and safety of these iconic creatures has become reliant on residents and visitors getting educated about living responsibly in bear country. It is estimated that 80 percent of human–bear conflicts can be traced to garbage. Learn how you can help bears by making your home BearWise at [BearWise.org](https://www.bearwise.org).



negative health effects. We can't assume an obese bear is a healthy bear."

BEARADISE?

The next chapter in the story of the comingling of bears and humans will depend on humans' commitment to living safely and responsibly with bears.

'Bearadise' would be a place where bears occasionally amble by neighborhoods to feast on acorns, beech and hickory nuts, blackberries, and maybe some insect larvae but do not find any accessible pet food or birdseed or scatter the contents of trash cans all over the yards. Bears would retain their innate fear of people and would skeddaddle when someone opened their garage door. There would be no bear burglaries of homes or cars.

Fortunately, the protocols for Bearadise have already been created by the good folks affiliated with BearWise. The program was sparked by biologists with the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies determined to produce a consistent, science-based messaging to reduce human–bear conflicts. In 2018, BearWise launched its popular website—[BearWise.org](https://www.bearwise.org)—and in 2022, the organization officially became part of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and expanded its reach nationally. In just a few years, it has become the

one-stop-shop for information on coexisting with bears. BearWise is perhaps best known for attractive, concise fliers (available in print or free downloadable pdfs) that cover every conceivable human–bear interaction: from managing your routines at home to walking your dog to hiking in the woods.

Several southern mountain towns and communities have already adopted BearWise practices, including Gatlinburg, Highlands, and Montreat. Lees-McRae College earned the distinction of being the first BearWise campus, and neighborhoods in Black Mountain and Asheville have formally embraced BearWise. Businesses such as Sierra Nevada Brewing Company are becoming BearWise recognized, too.

In 2000, Gatlinburg became one of the first communities to pass ordinances banning the feeding of bears and requiring bear-resistant garbage containers. Since then, the city has continued to tweak and expand its regulations, recently purchasing hundreds of highly durable 'Bearicuda' bear-resistant dumpsters they will lease to downtown business owners. Maintaining commercial dumpsters that are practical to use and successfully deter bears has been an ongoing challenge in Gatlinburg and other communities. Working with Smokies Life and the Smokies BearWise task force, Gatlinburg has

also installed “Keep Bears Wild, Don’t Toss Your Trash” signs along roadways and expanded the area in which bear-proof trash containers are mandatory. The city even removed the barbecue grills from a recreation area that borders the national park.

“Gatlinburg has a bear in its logo,” said Marlee Montgomery, Gatlinburg’s Smokies BearWise task force facilitator. “We need to do what’s best for bears. It feels like we’re on a positive trajectory right now.”

“There are things you need to do if you want to live with bears,” Clark said. “Places that have adopted BearWise principals live more harmoniously with bears. The solutions are pretty simple. It’s just a matter of doing them.”

BE READY FOR BEARS

Because of the increases in human and bear populations, close encounters between the two omnivorous species are becoming all but inevitable. Gibbs stresses that “*everyone* should know what you’re going to do when you see a bear. You need to know ahead of time what your actions will be. One of the best things to do is carry bear spray. It can create a barrier between you and the bear that will allow you to leave the area. You should have already practiced with your bear spray before you see a bear.”

Are you ready to encounter a bear? Are you sure? Prepare at BearWise.org. ❖

