

MDC encourages public to Be Bear Aware this spring

An estimated 350 black bears call southern Missouri home, and as the spring season gets underway, these magnificent mammals leave their winter dens in search of food. The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) is reminding Missourians to be proactive and “Be Bear Aware.”

MDC Resource Scientist and Furbearer Biologist Laura Conlee said it is imperative that residents remove bear attractants from their property, such as bird feeders, trash, barbecue grills, pet food, and food waste.

“As black bears become active in the spring, they are on a mission to find food,” said Conlee. “Keeping areas free of attractants and letting bears find natural foods is in everyone’s best interest. If you see a bear, let the animal be and enjoy the sighting, but be sure to not offer it any food.”

Conlee noted that intentionally feeding bears can be dangerous as it makes the bears comfortable around people. It can also lead bears to cause significant damage to property while searching for a meal.

A FED BEAR IS A DEAD BEAR

“When bears lose their fear of humans, they could 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 cannot be relocated and has to be destroyed. A fed bear is a dead bear.”

Food is usually a bear’s main motivator, but that also means it can be a main source of conflict. MDC offers the following tips to avoid attracting black bears to possible food sources:

- Store garbage, recyclables, and compost inside a secure building or in a bear-proof container until trash pick-up day.
- Keep grills and smokers clean and store them inside.
- Don’t leave pet food outside. Feed pets a portion at each meal and remove the empty containers.
- Refrain from using bird feeders in bear country from April through November. If in use, hang them at least 10 feet high and 4 feet away from any structure. Keep in mind that even if a bear cannot get to the birdseed, the scent could still attract it to the area.
- 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 keep food or toiletries in a tent, and do not burn or bury garbage or food waste.

AVOID ENCOUNTERS

While black bears are generally a shy, non-aggressive species and bear attacks are rare, follow these tips when outdoors in bear country:

- Make noise, such as clapping, singing or talking loudly, while hiking to prevent

surprising a bear.

- Travel in a group if possible.
- Keep dogs leashed.
- Be aware of the surroundings. If there is evidence of a bear, such as tracks or scat, avoid the area.
- Leave bears alone! Do not approach them, and make sure they have an escape route.

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Out of the three species of bears that live in the U.S. -- black bears, polar bears, and grizzlies -- the American black bear is the only species that resides in Missouri. The black bear is one of the largest and heaviest wild mammals in Missouri, some reaching up to 500 pounds. These bears were nearly eliminated from unregulated killing in the late 1800s, as well as from habitat loss when Ozark forests were logged. However, a small number of native black bears survived and reintroduction efforts in Arkansas also helped to increase their numbers in southern Missouri.

MDC research shows most of the black bear population resides in the southern third of the state in the Missouri Ozarks, but Missouri's population is growing and bears are moving into areas north of Interstate 44. Wandering bears have also been seen as far north as the Iowa-state line.

Black bears are currently a protected species in Missouri.

MDC asks the public to report bear sightings and post photos online at mdc.mo.gov/reportbears. The online report helps MDC staff obtain complete and accurate information. Sightings reported by the public allow MDC to track expansion of the black bear population and respond to nuisance issues.

For more information on Missouri's black bears and how to Be Bear Aware, visit mdc.mo.gov/bearaware. To learn about MDC's ongoing Missouri Black Bear Project, visit <https://tinyurl.com/ybtd7ewp>.