

## ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BEARS

### What are the statistics about human black bear attacks and fatalities in New York State and New England?

The following is an excerpt from NYSDEC's "Black Bear Response Manual" a document designed primarily for Department personnel and public law enforcement agencies:

"... There have been very few reports of people being injured by black bears in New York. Only three injuries were reported from 1960 through 1980, yet there was a minimum estimate of 3.8 million recreation days actually spent by people in areas (comprising approximately 15,000 square miles) occupied by black bears in New York. Since 1980 there have been seven injuries reported to have been caused by wild bears.

Estimates of recreation days have risen to 10 million per year in just the Adirondack bear range (which comprises approximately 10,000 square miles). The chance of being injured by a bear in New York is extremely remote and the few reported injuries were all minor."

An infant was killed by a bear in Sullivan County in 2002. This was the only human fatality caused by a black bear in the Eastern United States in recorded history. Although there is no way to understand what happened in this instance, it was speculated that the bear was conditioned to feed on human-based food sources, near human habitation, and that it didn't know that the infant was in fact human. It was speculated that the bear was attracted to food smells on the infant and that the infant was bundled in a way that prevented it from moving around and looking like a person. Neither were there any humans near the infant to ward off the bear. It was concluded that this was not a predatory act by the bear.

What should you do if a black bear is on your property and appears to be just passing through? Either enjoy the moment or make noise to frighten the bear from the yard. If there is no attractant you would not expect it to stop or to be a nuisance. If a bear has found attractants at other homes it may look for a similar meal around your property. In that case, it is best to use noise to frighten the bear away. (During the presentation, on October 17, 2006 at the Tuxedo Park School Mr. Merchant recommended air horns and banging pots to scare bears away.)

Your general description of black bears as being afraid of people and typically timid- could you elaborate? What should you do if you encounter a bear? What should you tell your children to do? Black bears are, by nature, shy, timid animals. This is especially true as they exist in the wild. (During the October 17<sup>th</sup> presentation, Mr. Merchant pointed out that a bear climbs a tree in order to escape.)

Large males will occasionally be reluctant to leave when confronted. Bears that resist being frightened off may challenge the person confronting them by standing their ground and by making popping and blowing noises with their mouth and teeth. The bear may also pound the ground with their feet and may even "bluff charge". Bluff charging is a normal behavior for black bears that is used when they feel threatened (i.e. they feel that someone or something has invaded their space). During these charges the bear will run toward whatever it feels is threatening it and then it will either stop short or will veer off to the side. That in itself is a very frightening experience.

Therefore, it is best to be careful not to crowd a bear and when frightening one away it is best to approach slowly and carefully. Remain facing the bear, talk loudly and/or use an air horn, clap hands, or otherwise make loud noise as you approach. Stop occasionally to give the bear time to react. Proceed only as far as you feel comfortable or to when the bear shows some reaction. (Mr. Merchant emphasized that you should always assure that the bear has an escape route.) If the bear doesn't respond, back away. After the bear has left, remove whatever attracted the bear, or if there wasn't anything, call the DEC for guidance.

Teach children how important it is to respect wildlife and to know that bears can be dangerous, even though they often appear cute and non-threatening. Playing dead does not work and running can cause a chase response by bears. Remain calm. It is best to stand your ground, make noise and/or speak making the bear aware that you are a person. Look big by raising your arms, clap hands, use an air horn or whistle. Back away slowly and get to

safety if the bear does not leave. A note to all is that if a black bear should ever go against the odds and attack, it is best to fight back; hitting the bear with whatever is handy, punching with fists, kicking, scratching at eyes, etc.

**What do black bears diets typically consist of?** Black bear diets consist of about 80% vegetative matter. It varies seasonally, but it consists of grasses and forbs, soft mast such as berries, apples, pears and cherries and hard mast such as beechnuts and acorns. The 20% non-vegetative part of their diet consists largely of carrion, deer fawns, rabbits, chickens and occasionally sheep, goats and pigs. They also feed on insects when available and particularly like the pupae found in bee nests and bee hives.

**What attracts black bears to human habitats?** Primarily garbage and bird food. Bears will also pass through yards in their daily travels in areas where development has occurred within their natural habitat.

**What can we do to prevent black bears from being attracted to human habitats?** Remove any food attractants, particularly bird feeders and garbage. Keep garbage containers inside until the morning of pickup whenever possible and put an ammonia-soaked rag in with garbage when it is sealed to help mask the attractive odor. Don't feed pets outdoors. Keep the area clean and free of debris.

**Under what circumstances does the DEC recommend that a bear be destroyed?** NYSDEC has recently adopted a classification system for guidance for DEC staff and law enforcement agencies on dealing with nuisance bears. The DEC recommends Class 1 Bears be destroyed (see below).

Class 1: Bears that are exhibiting or have shown behaviors that are clearly dangerous toward humans, domestic pets, or livestock should be identified and removed from the population immediately. Bears in this class would include animals that have physically attacked or attempted to injure a human, domestic pet, or livestock; and bears that have developed habits of breaking into occupied dwellings. This might also include animals that have previously been identified or handled by Bureau of Wildlife staff and are now deemed a hazard to public safety. Individual bears in this class should be identified by the DEC and removed from the population immediately.

Also, under NYSDEC regulation, a bear may be destroyed by a landowner or by DEC for "destroying or worrying livestock" or for damaging an apiary. Destroying a bear eliminates only one bear; another will most likely take its place."

The text above is excerpted from answers provided in an email dated October 27, 2006 by Matthew Merchant, Sr. Wildlife Biologist, NY State Dept. of Environmental Conservation. If you would like a full copy of the email, contact Dena Steele (piperdog@mac.com).