



## Safety in Bear Country Society

Script of the Video

# LIVING IN BEAR COUNTRY

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A summer barbecue, a fun way for family and friends to dine in the great outdoors. As the picnic comes to an end, the clean-up is fast and easy. But while supper is all over for the picnickers it may be just beginning for a bear attracted by leftovers. All too often here in bear country dining on garbage can turn deadly.

**Male reporter:** “Early this morning residents discovered a 500 pound black bear which had wandered into this residential neighborhood in search of food.”

**Female reporter:** “Experts say don’t try to approach it. As cute as it may look its still a wild animal and could be dangerous.”

**Male reporter:** “Last week a Zimmerman man shot and killed a bear in his back yard.”

**Male reporter:** “The bear was finally removed from the tree.” **Female reporter:** “But only after game officials shot him half a dozen times with a tranquillizer gun.”

**Female reporter:** “Residents believe this wild bear probably wandered into the area searching for food.”

Every summer, it’s the same sad story hundreds of bears are killed in communities across North America to protect people and property. Tragically, many of these deaths could be prevented. Most people living in bear country rarely see a bear. Yet there are few places left where bears can avoid all contact with humans. Where they live near people, conflicts are common but usually avoidable. This program provides practical advice on how you can reduce problems with bears.

## Living in Bear Country

### Bear Ecology

To understand why bears venture into our communities we need to know a little about how they live. Bears spend much of their lives searching for food. Where there’s plenty to eat they don’t have to wander far. But when pickings are slim a bear’s search for food can cover a vast area. Yet despite their formidable appetites bears are not greedy. They need vast amounts of high quality food to help them grow to nourish their offspring and to help them survive their long winter’s sleep. In the months prior to winter denning bears really pack on weight often gaining several pounds every day. This phenomenal fattening is critical. While in their winter dens, bears spend nearly half a year without eating or drinking. All their energy needs are met by

burning body fat.

Bears are born into a dangerous world and must quickly learn survival skills. Before they go off on their own, their mother teaches them many lessons. They are very intelligent once they learn something they can remember it for the rest of their lives. Yet there is always much that still needs to be learned. Juvenile bears need to find a place to live. When they encounter human settlements their inexperience and curiosity often lead them to explore. And that's when trouble begins. Problems with bears increase when natural foods become scarce. A drought, late frost, or an insect infestation can wipe out the food bears need to survive. A decrease in any food source can turn them to human foods to get the energy they need.

### **Bear and Human Interaction**

Often the places people like to live are also good bear habitat. When human settlements encroach on areas where bears are living, their access to natural sources of food can be restricted. Yet, sometimes our presence in bear country actually creates new feeding opportunities for these animals.

Bears possess a legendary sense of smell, and combined with their natural curiosity, they are attracted to a wide range of foods wherever humans are found. The most common is garbage. Our trash can become treasure for bears. Lured by the food we throw out, they will upset garbage containers climb into dumpsters and dig up landfills. Once bears associate humans with this food, they can become more bold, sometimes even breaking into homes and cabins. Even the feed we use to attract birds and feed our pets emit odours that bears can find irresistible. Sometimes people try to feed bears either out of compassion or just for fun. However well-intentioned this is always a bad idea. Not only can it lead to serious injury for the person doing the feeding it usually results in the death of the bear they are trying to help.

Bears show a remarkable ability in adapting to urban life unfortunately this ingenuity can often be harmful to them. Bears that come into frequent contact with people may gradually become comfortable around them. The more tolerance they develop for humans the more likely their exposure to improperly stored food or garbage. Bears conditioned to eating human foods can become dangerous. They may pursue these food sources aggressively, and cause property damage and injury to humans. On occasion these bears have killed people but usually it's the bear that ends up dead.

### **Individual Responsibility**

So, what can each of us do to reduce problems with bears? We can't easily change bear behaviour but we can modify ours. A few simple adjustments to our daily routine can prevent most conflicts.

#### **Human Food and Garbage**

Try looking at your surroundings from a bear's point of view. Remember the bear's powerful sense of smell. Many of the food wastes we throw out emit strong odours. Used cooking oil, grease, and meat scraps can smell like a delicious feast to a bear. Storing and disposing of garbage properly can go a long way to reducing human and bear conflicts. Keep all garbage where bears can't get it in your garage, basement, or shed. Bears are surprisingly adept at breaking into most garbage cans. Make sure any trash you leave outside is in a bear-resistant

container. Several types are on the market. They are strong enough to survive chewing and crushing. Lids must be tight-fitting and have latches and hinges that bear claws can't rip apart. A dirty garbage can is all it takes to attract a bear so wash yours periodically. Put your garbage out the same day you have curb-side pickup. Garbage cans left out overnight can become bear feeders.

### **Barbeques**

Barbecues are notorious for attracting bears. The challenge is to keep them clean of grease and food scraps. Remove and dispose of the grease in the drip can or grease tray every time you use your barbecue. Clean your barbecue regularly and store it in a secure place when it's not being used.

### **Animal Food**

The food we give our pets and livestock is rich in fat and protein. It's also very attractive to bears. Store feed in airtight containers, indoors. If possible, feed your pets inside. If they need to eat outside, make sure you remove any spilled or excess food. Anything you put in a feeder for birds may also bring in bears. Whether filled with seeds, suet, or hummingbird nectar to a bear a feeder is just a dish of candy waiting to be sampled. Feed birds only when bears are hibernating. From spring to fall, birds have enough natural food and don't really need feeding.

### **Orchards and Gardens**

Bears are naturally attracted to fruit-bearing trees and shrubs. Consider replacing your fruit trees with native, non-fruit-bearing species or spray them to prevent the formation of fruit. If your tree does bear fruit pick it as it ripens and collect any fruit off the ground every day. In some communities, volunteers will pick your fruit and donate the harvest to charity. An electric fence will help keep bears from eating your fruit and damaging your trees.

Composting is good for both the garden and the environment however improperly managed compost can create problems. Don't put meat, grease, or oil in your compost. Fruit and vegetable scraps are great for the soil, but they may also attract bears. Try chopping it into small pieces to speed up decomposition. Make sure you cover your compost with yard waste or soil and situate your compost and vegetable garden away from shrub thickets, natural trails, or the edge of the forest. Consider a worm composter inside your home.

Make your property less tempting to curious, hungry bears by not seeding with clover and keeping your dandelions in check. If you grow vegetables try to pick them as they mature and consider alternatives to fish fertilizers which are powerful bear attractants.

### **Bee Hives**

Bears have a legendary attraction to bee hives although it's not just the honey they're after. Bee larvae are rich in fat and protein, and a favourite on the bear menu. If you raise bees, the best and often the cheapest protection, is a good electric fence.

### **Livestock**

Remember that bears are predators, and may attack livestock. The simplest defence is a well-trained watchdog. Making sure your livestock are put inside at night can also help. And again, the best protection is an electric fence.

If something has drawn bears onto your property get rid of it immediately. The more frequently a bear pays a visit the more damage it will do the bolder and more aggressive it will become and the harder it will be to keep it away.

### **Community Responsibility**

Once bears become conditioned to human foods they will keep coming back into communities with no regard for fences or property lines. When bears start frequenting places where people live it's time for the entire community to acknowledge the problem and work together.

#### **Management Planning**

One effective approach is to form a committee representing people affected by conflicts with bears. Different people will have varied interests within the community yet everyone shares the common goals of eliminating bear problems and avoiding bear deaths. The first step is to identify the sources of conflict between people and bears. What attracts bears into the community, some local source of natural food or human attractants? And what are the travel routes that take bears through the community? Your committee can develop a bear management plan that focuses on a variety of approaches.

#### **By-laws, Waste Management, Planning**

The management of bear attractants starts in the household. Most people will solve these problems on their own but regulations and their enforcement may be necessary to ensure the full cooperation of all community members. Along with attractant management the planning of new development in the community should always take into account ways to minimize problems with bears. The collection, transfer, and disposal of garbage should also be part of the community plan. Replacing old garbage cans and curb-side pickup with bear-resistant neighbourhood dumpsters and electric fenced landfill sites can have dramatic results. Communities that have taken these measures have seen a sharp reduction in bear conflicts.

#### **Public Education**

For any community plan to be effective, public education is a vital tool. There are many ways to publicize the "Living with Bears" message. In addition to printed material bear experts can talk to local people about specific ways to avoid bear problems.

#### **Funding**

Although bear management measures may require some financial investment the long-term savings will often be greater than the short-term costs. Funding partnerships between community organisations and various levels of government can often be developed.

#### **Monitoring**

Getting rid of the things that attract bears is just the first step. Once a bear that's been conditioned to human foods can no longer find what it's after it starts to look farther a field. Sometimes these bears simply show up in a different part of the community and create a new problem. Staying vigilant for new bear conflicts is a long-term commitment.

#### **Deterring and Destroying Bears**

Despite our best efforts, encounters with bears will never completely stop. And the most common question asked by people living in bear country is "What do I do if a bear comes onto my property?" The best approach is to stay in a secure position and try to scare the bear away.

Your gestures and tone of voice should send a clear message that the bear is in the wrong place. Unless your dog is well trained, don't send it after a bear. It may anger the bear enough to cause it to attack or frighten it so much that someone may be injured as it flees. If you can't scare the bear off call in help from local Wildlife Officers or the police.

Non-lethal projectiles can also get the job done. Although deterrents can help frighten a bear away the real challenge is to prevent the bear from being attracted and rewarded in the first place. As long as there is something tempting in the air a bear will keep coming back, again and again. If you see a bear threatening someone's safety or damaging property, call the authorities.

Sometimes it will be necessary to kill bears that cause problems. However, by living responsibly in bear country, both individuals and communities can help prevent many bear deaths and keep themselves safer

### **Review and Conclusion**

You can help reduce conflicts between people and bears.

- By eliminating as many attractants as possible.
- By encouraging community efforts to identify and solve problems with bears.
- And by making sure you know the best way to respond if, despite your best efforts, a bear comes onto your property.

Consider making a personal commitment to following the suggestions in this program and help spread the word to others. You'll help yourself your community and the bears. Bears are remarkable animals with a fascinating natural history. The world is a much richer place when we share it with them.

To find out more about how to avoid bears or respond to encounters in natural areas around your community, have a look at the video "**Staying Safe in Bear Country**".