



## **Bears with Bad Habits**

Regan Berkley, Regional Wildlife Manager  
Idaho Department of Fish and Game, McCall Office

Summer in McCall means barbecues, vacationers, picnics at the beach, and bears.

At IDFG, we hear a lot about the bears. We hear about them during spring, when they're emerging hungry from winter dens and find fatty, protein filled foods in peoples' trash cans. We hear about them during summer, when seasonal residents and campers find it charming to see bears right in town. And we hear about them in fall, when the berry crop has dried up, and bears are trying to put on fat for their winter sleep.

We also hear a lot about our response to peoples' bear reports. Why can't we move problem bears? Why don't we come out to investigate every bear report? Why do we euthanize bears that prove to be chronic offenders?

Here are a few **"Bear Smart FAQs"** to help folks coexist with bears in this rural mountain town, and to explain why we respond the way we do:

### **What do I do if I have a bear hanging around my place?**

Two things: First, make sure it can't get to any food sources. Food sources include garbage, dog food, sticky residue on BBQ grills, bird seed, or outside coolers or refrigerators. Bears are smart, strong and resourceful, and can open lids and flaps, so simply closing a cooler or putting a strap on the garbage can won't likely work. McCall has a bear resistant dumpster ordinance, but you need to make sure it's latched properly. If you don't have a bear resistant container, keep your garbage inside until the morning of pickup.

Second, call IDFG and let us know about the bear. It helps us track where we have persistent bear problems and gives us a chance to talk to you about what might be causing the problem.

### **Won't IDFG just come kill the bear if I report a problem?**

Usually, no. Last summer we had over 65 reports of problem bears, and trapped and killed two. We are wildlife professionals who got into this field because we love wildlife. We realize that "bear problems" are usually really "people problems" caused by improper storage of food items. However, when bears become very bold or persistent, or if the problem of food access can't be resolved, or if the bear becomes aggressive, then we consider removing the bear.

### **Why can't IDFG just trap and move problem bears?**

By the time we trap a bear, we're pretty certain it's acquired some very bad habits – it's accustomed to human food sources, and has lost some of its wariness of people. When biologists have tracked bears they've relocated, they've learned that those bears often move long distances to find those human food sources. It is not uncommon for these bears to travel 30 miles or more within days of being moved. It's

nearly impossible to find a spot that's more than 30 miles from a town or a campground, and we can't in good conscience move a known "problem bear" to a place where it is likely to cause problems for someone else.

### **So how can I avoid having bear problems in the first place?**

This is by far the best solution – if the bad habit never starts, then there's no need to break the habit, and never a need to consider killing a bear that becomes aggressive or habituated. Here are several relatively easy things to remember:

- Do not put birdfeeders out between April and October.
- Use bear resistant trash containers, and ensure they are properly latched.
- If you do not have a bear resistant trash container, keep trash in an enclosed shed or garage until the morning of pickup.
- Keep pet food inside.
- Clean barbecue grills after use, and store them in an enclosed shed or garage.
- Avoid having refrigerators, freezers, or coolers outside.
- Talk to your neighbors, and ensure they're doing the same thing.

### **What about baby bears?**

These are a different story – not habituated yet, but separated from their mama for some reason. If you suspect a baby bear has been orphaned, call either IDFG (634-8137) or Snowdon Wildlife Sanctuary (634-8050). We work together to determine whether a baby bear is on its own, capture it if necessary, and ensure it's taken care of until it can survive on its own.

Living in or visiting a mountain town comes with responsibilities towards the wildlife that live here. Ensuring that bears do not have access to human food sources will help avoid creating "problem bears," which reduces the potential for harm to bears and humans. Even if you have never had a bear problem in the past, once a bear discovers food even one time, it forms a memory that is hard to erase. Be diligent about keeping food sources secure, so that no bear ever forms that memory at your home.