



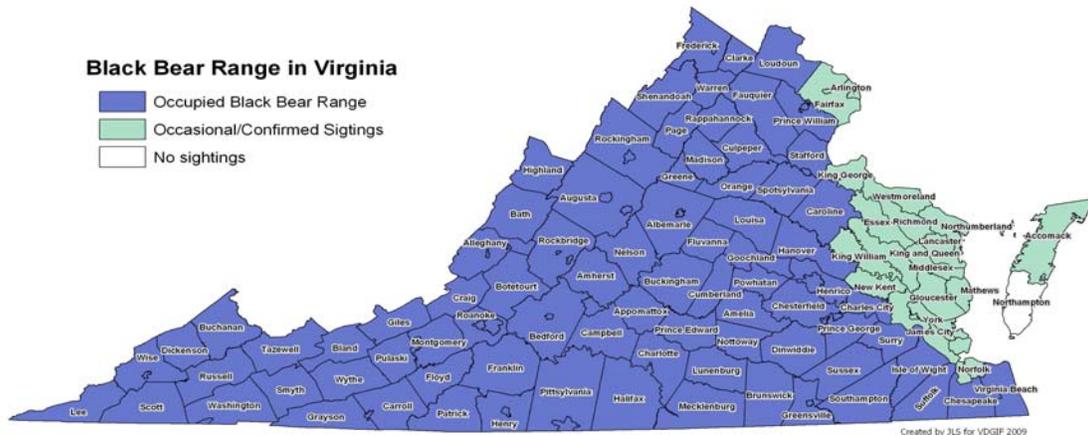
Living with Black Bears in Virginia



Photo by Steven Ferguson

Black bears and human populations commonly coexist in many parts of North America. Black bears occur throughout most of the Commonwealth, and residential areas of Virginia are encroaching into forested lands and habitats commonly used by wildlife as human populations are also growing and spreading across most areas of Virginia.

Where Are the Bears?



While the highest concentration of bears occurs in the Blue Ridge and Alleghany Mountains and around the Great Dismal Swamp, bears can be seen just about anywhere in Virginia. According to data from recreational sightings, hunter harvest, road kills, and VDGIF field staff, bears occur in at least 92 of Virginia's 98 counties and cities.

Many people enjoy the opportunity to see bears in the wild. However, when human-related foods become available to bears, problems may occur. Residents and visitors to Virginia can minimize negative interactions with bears by following some simple guidelines.

Residential Bear Problems

Bears are highly adaptable, intelligent animals and may learn to associate human dwellings with food. Bears are attracted to residential areas by the smell of food around homes.

- **The most common food attractants** are bird feeders, garbage, and pet food, but grills, livestock food, compost, and beehives can also attract bears.
- **Residential bear problems may occur at any time of year**, but are more common when natural food supplies are limited, usually in spring and early summer or in years when nut and berry productions are low.
- **Most common bear problems have simple solutions.** The typical problems involve turned-over garbage containers, trash littered across the yard, bears entering dog pens or coming onto porches to eat pet foods, or damaged birdfeeders. However, bears that learn to associate food with people can cause property damage in their search for food around houses.

If addressed quickly, problems are often resolved immediately. After a few failed attempts to find food, bears will usually leave the area and return to more normal wild food items. Bears have tremendous memories and therefore, they may return for as many as 10-14 days looking for these free food sources.

If problems are ignored, property damage can not only get worse, but bears may lose their distrust of humans. Bears habituated to humans pose public safety concerns and may need to be destroyed.

You Can Prevent Nuisance Bear Problems

Black bears have a natural distrust of humans, are shy, and usually avoid people. However, bears may be attracted to food sources in residential areas.

- **Secure your garbage:** Store garbage indoors, in a shed, in a garage, or in a bear-proof container.
- **Put garbage out in the morning** of pickup, not the night before.
- **Take trash to the dump frequently.**
- **Pick up pet food:** Feed pets only what they will eat in a single feeding or feed them indoors. Remove the food bowl soon after pets finish. Pick up uneaten food. Do not leave food out overnight.
- **Remove the bird feeder:** Bears consume seeds and nuts found in the wild, so bird feeders become a favored target for bears.
- **Clean the outdoor grill often.**
- **Do not put meat scraps or any other strong-smelling food in the compost pile.** Consider an enclosed compost bin.
- **Pick up and remove ripe fruit** from fruit trees and surrounding grounds.
- **Install electric fencing** to protect beehives, dumpsters, gardens, compost piles, or other potential food sources.
- **Talk to your neighbors:** Make sure your neighbors and community are aware of the ways to prevent nuisance bear problems.

Your Role

Prevention and cooperation!

You can help manage the Commonwealth's black bear population by keeping your property clear of food attractants and communicating with your neighbors to resolve community bear concerns. Remember, it is illegal to deliberately feed bears on both public and private lands. Even the inadvertent feeding of problem bears is illegal. Wildlife Managers don't recommend feeding wildlife due to concerns surrounding disease transmission and habituation of wildlife to human foods. In Virginia, it is now illegal to deliberately feed bears on both public and private lands. Bears attracted to residential areas or human dwellings due to feeding activities by people can cause problems ranging from nuisance activity to serious property damage. Regretfully, these animals often have to be destroyed.

4 VAC 15-40-281. Unauthorized feeding of bear, deer, or turkey on national forest lands and department-owned lands.

It shall be unlawful to place or direct the placement of, deposit, distribute, or scatter food or salt capable of attracting or being eaten by bear, deer or turkey on national forest lands or on department-owned lands without the written authorization of the Director of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries or his designee. The provisions of this section shall not prohibit the disposal of food in trash receptacles provided by the U.S. Forest Service on national forest lands or by the department on department-owned lands.

4 VAC 15-40-282. Unauthorized feeding of bear.

It shall be unlawful for any person to place or distribute food, minerals, carrion, or similar substances to feed or attract bear. Nor, upon written notification by department personnel, shall any person continue to place or distribute any food, mineral, carrion or similar substances for any purpose if the placement of these materials results in the presence of bear in such numbers or circumstances to cause annoyance or inconvenience to any person, cause property damage, or endanger any person or wildlife. After such notification, such person shall be in violation of this section if the placing, distribution, or presence of such food, minerals, carrion, or similar substances continues. This section shall not apply to wildlife management activities conducted or authorized by the department.

Respect the bear's space!

If a bear is on or near your property, do not escalate the situation by approaching, crowding around, or chasing the bear. This also applies to bears that have climbed up a tree. The best thing you can do is **leave it alone**. Because of bears natural distrust of humans, a bear that feels cornered will be looking for an escape route. By keeping people and pets away from the bear, you give it the best chance to come down from the tree and leave your property on its own.

Report unresolved problems or damage

If you experience a bear problem after taking appropriate steps of prevention, you may seek additional assistance by contacting VDGIF or local law enforcement.

The Department's Role

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) has established nuisance bear guidelines that promote public safety, protect property, and conserve bear populations. Whenever possible, the Department's approach to managing problem bears encourages the coexistence of bears and humans. The specific response to nuisance bear problems is determined by public concerns, public safety, type and extent of damage, black bear biology, animal welfare, and available control methods.

When you call the Department, an employee will discuss the problem with you. In most cases, a telephone call will be all that is necessary to find successful solutions (usually the removal of attractants). At times, a Department employee may visit your property to discuss additional options.

To find the VDGIF office nearest you, see our online [office locator](#) or call the Department's law enforcement dispatch at (804) 367-1258.

Things to Remember in Bear Country

If You Encounter a Bear at Home:

There are no definite rules about what to do if you meet a bear. In almost all cases, the bear will detect you first and leave the area. **Unprovoked bear attacks are very rare, and have never been documented in Virginia.** If you do meet a bear here are some suggestions:

- **Stay calm.** If you see a bear and it has not seen you, calmly leave the area. As you move away, make noise to let the bear discover your presence.
- **Stop.** Back away slowly while facing the bear.
- **Give the bear plenty of room to escape.** Bears rarely attack people unless they feel cornered or provoked.
- **Do not run or make any sudden movements.** Running could prompt the bear to give chase, and you cannot outrun a bear. If on a trail, step off the trail and slowly leave the area.
- **If there is a bear in your yard** and it approaches you, make yourself look big and make loud noises. Remain at a safe distance and throw rocks to make the bear feel unwelcome.
- **If there is a bear in your house** prop open all doors to the outside and **get out of the way of the exit.** Never close a bear into a room. Make noises and yell at bear to leave the house. Don't approach the bear but make sure it knows it is violating your territory.
- **If you surprise a bear speak softly.** This may reassure the bear that you mean it no harm.
- **Fight back.** If a black bear attacks you, fight back. Black bears have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars and even their bare hands.

If You Encounter a Bear While Camping:

- Do not store food, garbage, or toiletries in your tent!
- Keep your camp clean.
- Store your food safely. Use bear-proof containers. Metal ammunition cans (\$10-20) and Bear Canisters (approximately \$50-60) are easily packed and transported.
- Keep your tent and sleeping bag free of all food smells.
- Store the clothes you wore while cooking or eating with your food.

- Burn all grease off grills and camp stoves.
- Wipe table and clean eating area thoroughly.
- Store food and coolers suspended from a tree at least 10 feet off the ground and four feet out from the tree trunk.
- Dispose of garbage properly. Secure it with your food and then pack it out.
- Do not burn or bury the garbage.
- Sleep away from food areas. Move some distance away from your cooking area or food-storage site.
- Store toiletries with your food; the smell of toiletries may attract bears.

Scents and use of perfume or cologne is sometimes an attractant to bears.

A Bear Outside Your Tent:

If you hear a bear or other animal outside your tent make sure it is aware that there is a human inside by using a firm monotone voice. Turn on a flashlight or lantern. If the bear enters the tent fight back and yell. Many bears have been driven off this way.

If You Encounter a Bear While Hiking:

- Hiking at dawn or dusk may increase your chances of meeting a bear.
- Use extra caution in places where hearing or visibility is limited, such as brushy areas, near streams, where trails round a bend and on windy days.
- Reduce your chances of surprising a bear on the trail by making noise, talking or singing.
- Make sure children are close to you or within your sight at all times.
- Leave your dog at home or have it on a leash.

Common Black Bear Myths

Myth: A bear standing on its hind legs is about to charge or attack.

Fact: A bear stands on its hind legs to get a better view and smell of the surroundings. This is not an aggressive posture, just a way to determine who or what piqued its interest.

Myth: Bears are dangerous predators.

Fact: Although classified as carnivores, black bears are omnivores, and opportunistic feeders. This means that they eat both plants and animals. Over 80% of their diets consist of vegetation, fruit, and nuts. The remainder includes mostly insects and larva, carrion, fish, and occasionally small mammals. The majority of extremely rare predatory attacks are by male black bears in remote areas.

Myth: One of the most dangerous encounters is getting between a mother black bear and her cubs.

Fact: Because black bears can tree their cubs, it is rare for them to injure a person in that situation. Black bear cubs are great at climbing and will be sent up a tree if the mother bear feels nervous about a situation. The mother bear will either run off to lead the danger away or stay close by until the perceived threat passes. Just like with any young animals you never want to try to get near them. If you see a mother bear and cubs give them some space, be quiet, and retreat slowly.

Myth: Bears are unpredictable.

Fact: Bears use body language and vocalizations to show their intentions. Learning about bear behavior can be beneficial to people who travel in bear country.

Myth: Bears have poor eyesight.

Fact: Bears see in color and have good vision similar to humans

Myth: Shooting or relocating a 'nuisance' bear will solve the problem.

Fact: Removing a 'problem' bear and not the attractant will only create a newly available habitat niche so another bear can move right back in, creating a vicious cycle of killing.

More Information

To see the VDGIF Video Living with Black Bears in Virginia visit:

www.dgif.virginia.gov/video/living-with-black-bears/

For a printable brochure visit:

www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/living-with-black-bears.asp

For information and a guide on electric fencing, other information and links visit:

www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/

To purchase a bear proof trash can or enclosure model you may have seen at one of our offices, including dumpsters and retrofit lids:

www.bearicuda.com/index.php

www.dawginc.com/bearproof-can/bear-container.php

www.bearproofing-r-us.com

Other sources:

www.bearproofcontainers.com

www.bearproofinc.com

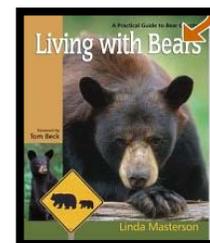
www.bearsaver.com

www.unbearablebins.com

For bear deterrent camping products and portable electric fences:

www.counterassault.com

Recommended Reading: Living with Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country Linda Masterson, 2006



North American Bear Center: www.bear.org

Bear Smart Community Guidelines and Bear Information: www.bearsmart.com

Black Bear Management Plan: www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/

Visiting Bear Habitat

- Keep a close watch on children, and teach them what to do if they encounter a bear.
- While hiking, make noise to avoid a surprise encounter with a bear.
- Never keep food in your tent.
- Store food and toiletries in bear-proof containers or in an airtight container in the trunk of your vehicle.
- Keep a clean camp by cleaning up and storing food and garbage immediately after meals.
- Use bear-proof garbage cans whenever possible or store your garbage in a secure location with your food.

If You Encounter a Bear

Never approach a bear. Give it plenty of room to pass by. Most black bears try to avoid confrontation when given a chance.

Do not run from a bear. Running away from a black bear may stimulate its instinct to chase. You cannot outrun a bear. Instead, stand and face the animal. Make eye contact without staring. If you have small children with you, pick them up so that they do not run or panic. Give the bear room so that it can avoid you.

If you encounter a bear cub, do not pick it up! You run the risk of being attacked by a protective mother bear. If you think the cub is abandoned, contact the Department of Fish and Game. Orphaned cubs can be captured, rehabilitated and released, but only by organizations with specific authorization. People who pick up cubs without authorization may be cited.

People have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat they are sharing.

If a Black Bear Approaches

Try to demonstrate to the bear that you may be a danger to it. Make yourself appear larger, stand up, raise your arms and open your jacket. Yell at the bear, bang pots and pans or whatever objects you may have with you, and create a general commotion.

If a Black Bear Attacks

Black bear behavior is quite variable. Research indicates that bear attacks have been avoided or injuries reduced when the victims fought back using any means available. Throwing rocks and striking the bear with branches or camping equipment have been shown to be effective.

Reporting a Problem

If a bear behaves aggressively or attacks people, contact the California Department of Fish and Game during regular business hours: Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. If the encounter or attack occurs after business hours, call the California Department of Fish and Game's 24-hour dispatch at (916) 445-0045. The Department will assess the threat to public safety and take appropriate action.



Photo by Bob Kinney

California Department of Fish & Game Offices

Northern California-North Coast Region
(530) 225-2300

Sacramento Valley-Central Sierra Region
(916) 358-2900

Central Coast Region
(707) 944-5500

San Joaquin Valley-Southern Sierra Region
(559) 243-4005

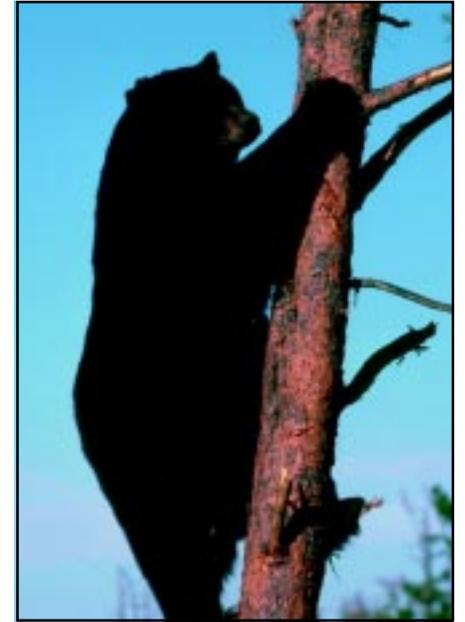
South Coast Region
(858) 467-4201

Eastern Sierra-Inland Deserts Region
(562) 590-5132

Bishop Office
(760) 872-1171

Eureka Office
(707) 445-6493

Living With California Black Bears



File photo

California Department of Fish & Game
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, California 95814



Black Bear Distribution



Bear Facts

California has a large population of black bears (*ursus americanus*), estimated at 16,000 to 24,000 animals. Black bears range in color from black to cinnamon, often with a white blaze on the chest. Males are much larger than females. On average, a black bear is about 3-1/2 feet tall (standing on all four feet) and weighs about 200 pounds, but some males can weigh over 500 pounds. Black bears are strong swimmers and tree climbers. Although they have a clumsy walk, they are surprisingly fast sprinters, reaching speeds of up to 30 miles per hour.

In the wild, black bears occupy forests and wooded mountains. They are omnivorous, meaning they eat both meat and vegetation. They eat whatever is available, depending on the season. A typical diet consists of berries, plants, nuts, roots, fruit, honey, honeycombs, bees, insects, and larvae. Bears also catch and eat fish and small mammals, and will eat carrion (dead animals).

Female bears mate beginning at four years of age, and produce cubs every other year. The cubs remain with their mother for 18-20 months, learning to forage and hunt.

As winter approaches, bears will forage up to 20 hours a day, storing enough fat to sustain them through hibernation. They seek out a suitable den, such as a hollow tree—sometimes 40 to 60 feet above the ground—and line it with leaves or pine needles. Females with yearling cubs will hibernate with their cubs. Bears remain in their dens, without eating, until spring. They will often return to the same den to hibernate year after year. Large trees are very important to bears.

A Fed Bear is a Dead Bear

In the spring, bears emerge from their dens with one thing in mind: eating. They travel for miles in search of food, guided by a keen sense of smell. A full garbage can or a messy campsite might seem like the Motherlode to a hungry bear, and that's when most bear/human conflicts begin.

The California black bear, in addition to being a strong swimmer, sprinter, and climber, is very intelligent. One easy meal from a house, car or campsite is all it takes for some bears to learn that people and food go together. Once a bear makes this association, it's not a pleasant story for people or bears.

The best way to avoid conflict with bears is to prevent it.

One hungry bear is capable of causing thousands of dollars worth of property damage in a single incident. By law, a homeowner who has taken steps to eliminate bear attractants but still suffers property damage can obtain a permit from the California Department of Fish and Game to kill the bear causing the problem.

Bears that are accustomed to people can become bold and even aggressive. There are dozens of documented cases of people being mauled, and even killed, by black bears. Although rare, when a bear behaves aggressively towards people, the Department of Fish and Game may need to euthanize the animal in the interest of public safety.



DFG File photo

What About Relocation?

Over the years, wildlife agencies around the country have tried to solve bear/human conflicts by capturing and moving “problem bears” to other locations. Almost without exception, the relocated bear suffers one of three fates: 1) it returns to the place where it was captured (and resumes its problem behaviors); 2) it remains in its new location, continuing the problem behaviors; or 3) it dies in its new location as a result of conflicts with other bears.



DFG File photo

What About “Bear Education”?

A researcher in Alaska tried an experiment to determine if bears that routinely raided local garbage cans could “unlearn” their behavior. He randomly placed pellets, laced with a chemical, in the garbage cans. When eaten, the pellets would cause the bears to vomit violently. These intelligent animals quickly learned that the garbage was fine, as long as they avoided the pellets.

Shooting bears with rubber bullets or pepper spray may temporarily scare them away, but it hasn't been successful in changing a bear's behavior if the bear has learned that food is available. At best, it is a short-term, temporary solution in areas that already have problem bears. As long as there is food available, the bears return after the bullets and pepper spray are put away. These tactics are legal for use only by law enforcement personnel and employees of some public agencies.

Prevention Is The Key

People who live in, or visit, bear habitat have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat they are sharing. Feeding bears, whether intentional or not, can amount to a death sentence for the animal. More and more communities and campgrounds are adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward people who feed bears and other wildlife. In some places, people are being cited for failing to properly store food and garbage.

Living in Bear Habitat

Bears are attracted to anything smelly or edible, especially garbage. Bears are also attracted to bee hives, orchards and gardens. Occasionally, livestock are killed and eaten. Follow these guidelines to help keep your home “bearproof”:

- Deodorize garbage cans with bleach or ammonia.
- Double-bag garbage to help eliminate odors.
- Separate “wet garbage” and keep it in an air and odor tight container. Use a garbage disposal whenever possible. Freeze meat bones or other smelly items until pick-up day.
- Be sure to keep barbecue grills clean.
- Pick up fallen tree fruit, and put away pet food and bird feeders at night.
- Close windows at night on accessible ground floors and decks.
- Don't leave food in or near a window sill or on a counter near an open window.
- Securely block access to potential hibernation sites, such as crawl spaces under decks or buildings.
- Install bear-proof garbage and compost containers.
- Request a bear-proof garbage bin for your neighborhood or apartment complex.