

The Return of the Bear

By the early 1970s, the black bear, WV's state animal, could only be found with any regularity in 10 of our eastern mountain counties. Wildlife biologists at that time believed the bear population numbered less than 500, and the future did not look bright for the black bear. However, over the course of nearly 50 years, many positive steps allowed the healthy growth of West Virginia's bear population.



Research into the life cycle of the black bear helped wildlife biologists learn what factors control the growth of West Virginia's bear population. These research findings were used to modify bear hunting seasons to protect female black bears and allow the population to grow. During the same time period, West Virginia's forests were maturing, which provided much more bear habitat across the state. In addition, people's attitudes toward black bears softened over time. For many people, bears have become an animal to respect and enjoy instead of a nuisance to eliminate. The black bear population in West Virginia is now considered "statewide," and bears have been harvested in 46 of 50 counties in recent years.

Not in My Backyard

In predicting black bear population dynamics, one factor that wildlife biologists underestimated was the adaptability and resilience of the black bear. Black bears were once viewed as an animal of the wilderness and were thought to need large tracts of undeveloped land to prosper. However, black bears

have demonstrated that they can live in and around the major cities of West Virginia.

In a recent study of the black bear's habitat use and its vulnerability to hunting in urban areas of West Virginia, black bears were fitted with GPS tracking collars around the cities of Beckley, Charleston and Morgantown. Bears were found to be year-round residents of the area within 3 miles of city limits. In fact, many bears ventured inside city limits on occasion.

Bears in urban areas preferred low-density housing areas where tracts of woods between homes serve as travel corridors, feeding areas, and escape cover. These bears have ready access to human foods in the form of garbage, pet food, and bird and animal feeders on a year-round basis.

Human-Bear Conflicts

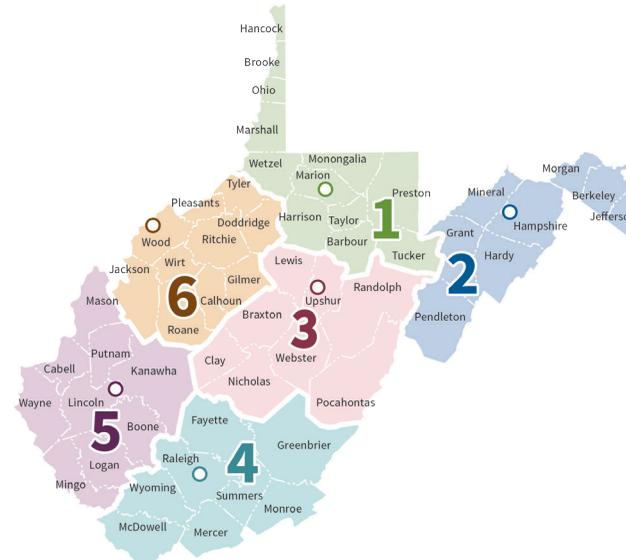
Human – bear conflicts can be categorized in many ways. Our tolerance levels for bears living in close proximity to people vary greatly. To some people, the mere sighting of a bear in their yard or neighborhood causes fear of property damage and for human safety. Others will tolerate bears raiding their bird feeders or scattering their trash. Often, this tolerance level depends on a person's knowledge about bears and whether they have had previous experiences dealing with bears. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources logged 16,601 human – bear conflicts between 1997 – 2017.



Living With Black Bears in West Virginia

WV DNR District Offices

District 1 – Farmington	304-825-6787
District 2 – Romney	304-822-3551
District 3 – French Creek	304-924-6211
District 4 – Beckley	304-256-6947
District 5 – Alum Creek	304-756-1023
District 6 – Parkersburg	304-420-4550
Operations Center – Elkins	304-637-0245
Main Office – South Charleston	304-558-2771



Eliminate the Food Source to Prevent the Problem

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HUMAN – BEAR CONFLICTS fluctuate yearly and within years based on natural food abundance. Some states have not shown a reduction in human – bear conflicts as a result of recreational bear harvest. However, if recreational bear harvest is high enough to reduce the overall bear population, a reduction in human – bear conflicts is likely. West Virginia began liberalizing bear hunting seasons in 2008 as part of the West Virginia Black Bear Management Plan. Since 2008, the human – bear conflict trend has been decreasing. West Virginia will always have human – bear conflicts with our robust bear population. The goal of the WVDNR is to balance the bear population with the wants and tolerance levels of West Virginians, and to educate our citizens about how to live with bears on a daily basis.



WEST VIRGINIA HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICT DATA

An analysis of human – bear conflicts logged from 2008 – 2017 (n = 9,710 individual conflicts) shed further light on both the months of greatest conflict (Figure 1) and the types of conflicts (Figure 2) that are reported. Bears can be active at any time during the year. However, bears typically leave the den beginning in mid-March and re-enter the den beginning in mid-November. Natural foods are scarce when bears leave the den in the spring and bears will readily take advantage of high-calorie human-provided foods. The

decrease in cumulative conflicts in the month of July coincides with ripening raspberries, blackberries and blueberries. Human – bear conflicts typically recede in the fall as hard mast (acorns, beech nuts, hickory nuts) and soft mast (black cherry, dogwood, autumn olive) ripen and bears begin entering the den. However, in years of mast scarcity, bears will continue to seek out human food sources to gain weight as they prepare for hibernation.

Bears coming into close proximity (being seen, being around property, and/or showing aggressive behavior) to humans or dwellings is the number one reported category of human – bear conflict. These conflicts arise as the bears are attracted to human-provided food. The remaining categories of conflicts involve actual damage, with bears disturbing garbage (trash cans, dumpsters) accounting for twice the damage of all the other categories combined. Effectively securing our trash and removing other food sources will help reduce the number of bear damage incidents.

The Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has developed an educational campaign to teach people how to live responsibly with black bears.

1. Never feed or approach bears.

Feeding bears (intentionally or unintentionally) trains them to approach homes and people for more food. Bears will defend themselves if a person gets too close, so don't risk your safety and theirs! *In West Virginia it is illegal to feed or bait bears.*

2. Secure food, garbage and recycling.

Food and food odors attract bears, so don't reward them with easily-available food or garbage.

3. Remove bird feeders when bears are active.

Birdseed and other grains have a high calorie content making them very attractive to bears. The best way to avoid conflicts with bears is to remove feeders.

4. Never leave pet food out.

Feed outdoor pets portion sizes that will be completely eaten during each meal, and then remove leftover food and the food bowl. Securely store these foods so nothing is available to bears.

5. Clean and store grills.

If you use an outdoor grill, clean it thoroughly and make sure that all grease and fat is removed. Store cleaned grills and smokers in a secure area that keeps bears out.

6. Let neighbors know.

Share news with your friends and neighbors about recent bear activity and how to avoid bear conflicts. Bears have adapted to living near people; are you willing to adapt to living near bears?

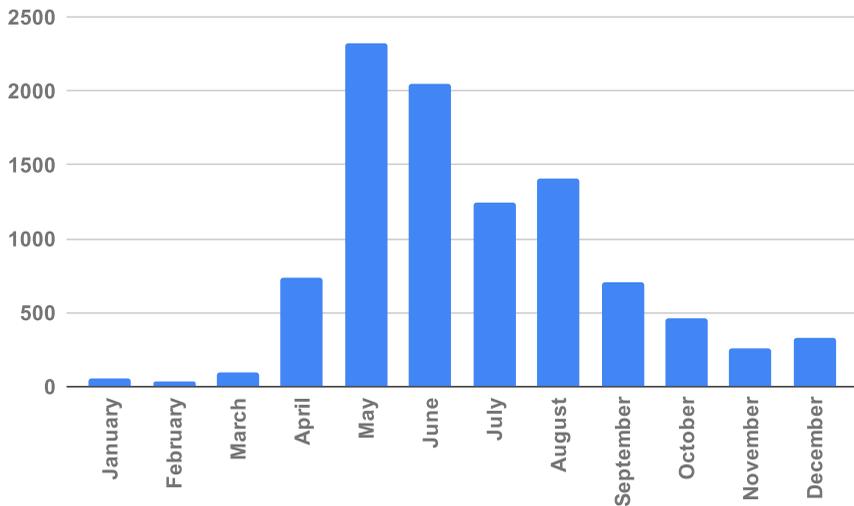


Figure 1. Human – bear conflicts logged at WVDNR district offices 2008 – 2017

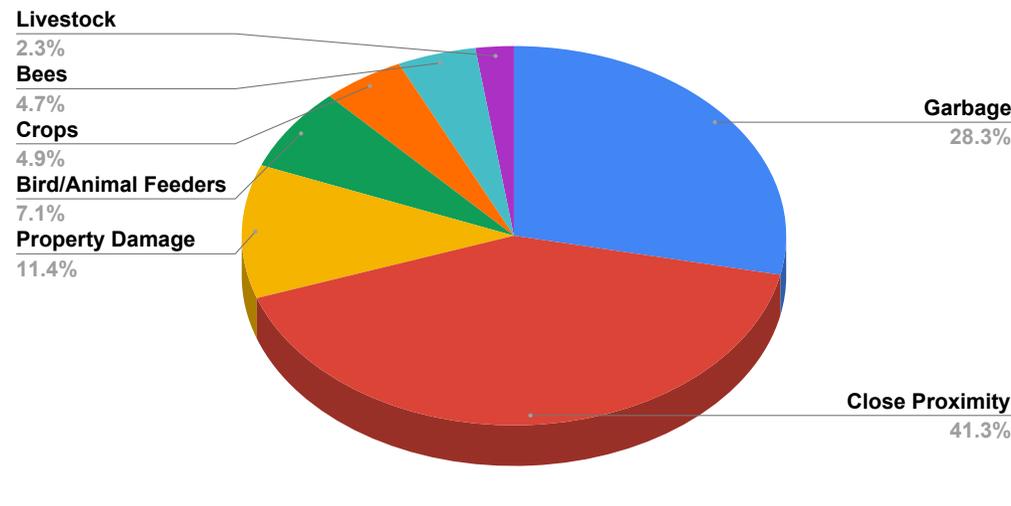


Figure 2. Types of human – bear conflicts logged at WVDNR District offices 2008 – 2017

PREVENTING HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICTS

PREVENTION is the key to avoiding human-bear conflicts in most instances. Unlike in the past, when nuisance bears could be moved to locations where bear populations were low, West Virginia now has a healthy bear population statewide, and relocating bears is no longer an effective or wise option. Relocation exposes the bear to additional sources of mortality when it is placed in unfamiliar territory, and may increase the spread of parasites and diseases. Unfortunately, this leaves lethal removal as the only course of action when a bear becomes a true nuisance.

If you care about the health and safety of West Virginia's black bears, be proactive in eliminating food attractants around your home before conflicts occur. Do not allow a situation where a bear is regularly visiting to scavenge human foods. This bear will quickly lose its fear of typical human deterrents and could present a greater risk to your safety and property.

For additional information about black bears, visit www.wvdnr.gov or www.bearwise.org