

Beware Of Hungry Bears

Black bears normally are shy and elusive, but the Missouri Department of Conservation urges those few Missourians lucky enough to see bears to keep them at arm's length. Keeping bears wild not only protects people and property – it protects bears, too.

Throughout most of the year, Missouri's black bear population is nearly invisible. Naturally fearful of humans, they prefer to mind their own business, foraging for natural foods in fields and forests. But summer can be a lean time for bears. They lose most of their fat reserves during the winter and have to subsist on vegetation, insects, and other less substantial fare until blackberries ripen in midsummer. Even then, they are constantly looking for food. If they find an unsecured garbage can, a bowl of pet food left outdoors, or even a hummingbird feeder full of sugar water, their stomachs sometimes overcome their shyness. That can get them into trouble.

“Bears are wonderful animals,” says Resource Scientist Jeff Beringer, “and they generally are harmless. But things can end badly for bears that get in the habit of foraging for food near people. Harassment and other aversive conditioning often convinces a bear to stay away from people. But sometimes they keep going back where they don't belong and have to be destroyed.”

The great majority of Missouri's black bears live south of I-44. Most are found between Poplar Bluff and Springfield. People who live in this area should consider not feeding birds and other wildlife from April through September, especially in rural areas. Later in the fall, bears are busy feeding on their dietary mainstay, acorns. Bears are much less active from December through March, when supplemental feeding is more important for birds.

Beringer also recommends keeping pet food and livestock feed inside secure outbuildings. The same is true for barbecue grills and other items that smell like food. Trash should be put out as close to pickup time as possible to minimize exposure to hungry bears, and feeders that dispense corn or other feed for wildlife should not be used during the summer.

Beringer said campers and floaters in south-central Missouri also need to be bear aware. It is a good idea to keep food locked inside vehicles with the windows closed when it is not being used. Floaters should keep food in bear-proof containers or hang it from ropes between trees at night or when it is left unattended.

To learn more about black bears, including preventing and dealing with black bears around potential food sources, visit mdc.mo.gov/node/973. If you have problems with a nuisance bear, contact the nearest MDC office or conservation agent.