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Residents And Hunters, Be Aware and Careful Of Bears This Fall

By Mark Ruby for Swan Ecosystem Center

Wildlife can have a knack for proving you wrong. As a bear ranger in the Swan Valley, I work with many local residents on keeping alluring human materials off limits to bears.

My strategy is pretty standard. In my position there is no need for judgment or frustration. Just act as a resource for people. Give them the facts and draw from your experiences. I encourage people to store their garbage or other bear attractants inside garages or sheds away from walls or windows. I advocate use of bear resistant containers. I endorse prevention of bear problems over reacting to one. I use stories from my work experiences to illustrate my perspective or my point. However, when I find myself standing in front of a garage door that has been pushed in by a big male grizzly or look at pictures of a cabin owner's door frame that used to house the front door that now resides in the living room, wise words can be hard to find.

What do you tell people that have taken all the necessary precautions to prevent having a bear problem? First I want to explain that bears are wild animals and one particular individual's behavior may not be representative of what is normal within a population.

Second, I think about how to illustrate that likely the bear responsible may have become conditioned to human foods over a period of time based on other food rewards received at garbage cans, dog

food dishes, bird feeders at neighbor's houses or even in other communities 20 miles away.

Third, I rationalize that the bear that caused the problem could have just been really hungry. All the management and prevention in the world may not necessarily stop a bear driven by a churning metabolism.

I can live with looking foolish. Human-bear conflicts can be predicated on dozens of factors that include biology, ecology, physiology, sociology and few other "ologies" that I may never be aware of. I have learned to look at human bear conflict as a level of risk. A probability of occurrence. There are no guarantees. No sure bets. The minute you become confident that you know which way the dice roll, you might be surprised.

While you can never ensure the future, being aware of the risks can help you hedge your bets. There may be no such thing as a sure bet when it comes to wildlife, but one can still manage the circumstances to create the best chance of a positive outcome.

Managing attractants around your home to reduce the chance of a bear conflict is a good way to hedge your bets. The challenge is thinking proactively. If you have had bear problems before this is one way to evaluate your system's weaknesses. However, even items that "have never been a problem" carry a level of risk for bear conflict.

Examples of these things include garbage cans in open garages or pole barns, dog food on screened in porches, outdoor freezers or refrigerators. The risks for having a bear problem change with all the other variables in the season.

There are many predictive factors to be included when looking at the risk of having a bear problem. Early spring and late fall are seasons when naturally occurring bear foods are low, typically have higher rates of bear conflicts.

On a larger time scale, differing years may have large crop failures such as huckleberries or white bark pine seeds. These failure years have been documented by Yellowstone researchers to have correlating high frequencies of bear conflicts around rural homes and businesses.

This fall may be one of those tough times for bears and natural bear foods. Low food abundances raise the stakes for bears. During this hunting season, reduce your risks of bear conflict by storing your game appropriately and be wary around gut piles.

Think about your approach if you are returning to retrieve your deer or elk later in the day or the following morning. Can you plan your return so you can view the carcass from a safe distance if a bear has claimed it? Try to return from an upwind position if possible. Carry bear pepper spray and pay attention to sights and sounds as you approach the carcass. If you hear huffing and thrashing noises in the brush, assume a predator is defending the carcass.

Don't attempt to chase a predator off your kill. Instead let a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks representative know of your decision to abandon the game. Also beware of gut piles left by other hunters. Usually the raucous presence of ravens, jays, and eagles is an obvious clue that a gut pile is nearby and that you should give it a wide berth. When you get home or back to camp, find as secure space to store your carcass or hang it at least 10 feet off the ground and four feet from a tree trunk.

Early reporting of bear conflicts helps agency managers track conflicts in different areas. Bears that receive a food reward often return within the next few nights. Even if the bear does not return, the bear may be following its nose to other similar attractants in neighboring areas. Early reporting to agencies helps them measure bear problems across a landscape and respond appropriately. Reporting

bear conflict early helps agencies react in a timely manner, diminishing the amount of conflict a bear may have over time.