

Living with Bears

This public information bulletin sets out the Valhalla Wilderness Society's recommendations about bears coming into Slokan Valley villages. By far the worst problem is in New Denver; it has one of the worst bear problems in the province. This has led to two unacceptable situations. Many villagers feel it is socially unacceptable to keep attracting the bears and then killing them. And it is equally unacceptable to have bears walking down Main Street in broad daylight or coming onto porches. This paper talks about the possible solutions. Contributors to this bulletin include bear biologist and VWS director Wayne McCrory, who has done much field research on bears and has been a consultant to numerous parks and large municipalities in BC on bear-human conflicts. Another contributor is Bear Smart representative Daniel Sherrod.



A black bear cub in a fruit tree in "the orchard" in New Denver. The cub and its family were shot shortly after the photograph was taken. The killing caused shock and very bad feelings in many nearby residents.

Why are there an unusual number of bears in the villages this year?

No one knows for sure, but a key factor was undoubtedly this year's unusually cold spring. Bears seek the earliest green growth when they come out of hibernation. But this year, huge areas up in the mountains remained covered with snow at least a month later than usual. This would have driven more bears down low where the snow was melted, and where people live. Then the berry crops out in the bush (several kinds) were poor, while New Denver had abundant cherries.

Why are the bears a problem?

Once they come into the villages or on farms, bears have wild patches in which to bed and rest. They start feeding on compost and garbage, and then go from cherries to plums, apples and pears. In village campgrounds they find coolers and barbecues that tourists have left uncontained or unattended. Chickens are also one of their preferred foods.

To the degree that they get food, they will stay longer, develop more of a habit of eating human foods, become more accustomed to being around people, and be less willing to leave when attempts are made to drive them away. This "habitation" is associated with increased injuries to humans, though the injuries tend to be minor.

Why should we change our behaviour — spend money on electric fences for fruit trees or chicken coops, or fully bear-proofing the village garbage system — to accommodate bears?

Many local residents have an ethic about respecting other species. Seeing a bear on the way to Nakusp, Kaslo or Nelson has been a special part of the Slokan Valley experience for years. And many of us know of visitors who have come to our villages from areas that have no bears, and who were thrilled at the experience of seeing them.

Yet in some years a small village like New Denver can be a bear "sink." This means that our bear attractants — fruit and garbage — are capable of drawing bears from miles around into a vortex of human habituation and ultimately their death. Given repetitive late springs and poor berry crops, it would be possible for a town like New Denver, if it failed to take adequate measures to reduce attractants and deal with problem bears, to cause a drastic reduction in black bears over a large area.

There have been 8 black bears killed in New Denver so far this year, and it is likely there will be more. Conservation Office records show 19 black bears killed in New Denver over the five years from 2002 to 2007. During the same time period, a total of 39 bears were killed in the northern Slokan Valley, from Silverton to Summit Lake. As of mid-August

this year, there had already been 167 black bears shot provincewide. The final figure will be much higher.

Every time a conservation officer responds to a bear complaint it costs the taxpayers about \$400 to have a bear shot and taken to the landfill. The costs this year alone would have bought a lot of bear-proof residential containers or electric fencing for fruit trees. What a waste of bears' lives and taxpayers' dollars this situation has become.

What about the risks?

Until last week, there was only one black bear-inflicted injury on record for the Slokan Valley over the last 100 years. That injury was a serious one involving a child. But think about how many bears must have been in the villages, campgrounds and on our farms during that 100 years. This is in keeping with records for North America, which show that about 90% of injuries from black bears are minor. In his book *Bear Attacks*, Canadian bear expert Dr. Stephen Herrero refers to this pattern as "the tolerant black bear."

Last week there was another injury involving a mother black bear that attacked two dogs, apparently to defend her cub. The owner successfully rescued his dogs by beating the bear with his fists, but received a gash on his arm.

Every bear-human conflict leading to injury is a serious concern, and it is partly for this reason that we should be implementing Bear Smart practices more effectively. Residents who don't want bears around, who fear the risk they pose, can be comforted; because the best solution, the only solution, is to try as much as possible to keep bears from coming to town, to make sure they don't stay long when they arrive. The best way is to reduce their access to food, combined with a continuous program of live-trapping them for relocation in the wild.

How are we doing?

New Denver residents and the Village Council are trying to solve the problems, but it takes several years to bring about significant change.

Garbage: This summer the amount of residential garbage strewn about by bears was dramatically reduced over the previous year. By now almost everyone knows not to store their garbage outside during bear season. It should be stored in a basement, shed or garage, or on a back porch that can be securely locked. It should be set out as close to pick-up time as possible. If you don't have such a secure storage area, consider investing in a bear-proof bin. They cost \$200 and can be obtained through Daniel Sherrod, the Bear Smart Coordinator.

New Denver would benefit from having at least one large bear-proof garbage dumpster on the site of the recycling bins, that everyone can use as needed. Or, New Denver could follow the examples of Canmore and Banff, and invest in neighborhood bear-proof dumpsters. It has nearly eliminated

the bear problems in these towns. New Denver has been gradually increasing its number of bear-proof dumpsters and bins; but these expenditures are defeated as long as non-bear-proof bins continue to be used.

Like national parks, our villages raise considerable revenue from camping fees in small municipal parks. Campgrounds have concentrated bear attractants, and they can be places where black-bear-inflicted injuries of humans occur. So campground revenue brings special campground responsibilities. *All* garbage in campgrounds needs to be bear-proofed. Signs should tell campers where to put their garbage. Visitors should have to walk to the bear-proof dumpster. If they camp in national or provincial parks, they are accustomed to doing this.

Fruit trees: New Denver is struggling with its many domestic and wild fruit trees, but progress has been slow. We need as many people as possible to pick fruit from trees before or as soon as it becomes ripe. Some people, if they don't want the fruit, take it far out of town and leave it for the bears.

An electric fence is very effective at keeping bears out and, for most situations, costs about \$175. It's a one-time investment that will solve the problem year after year. Free assistance in purchasing and setting up the fence is provided by the local Bear Smart program. Just call 358-7264. More and more people are trying this and say they love it. It's simple, easy, and *it works*. The residents' trees don't get torn up, they get their fruit and they can let it ripen as long as they want before they pick it. With more funding, the Bear Smart Program would be able to better help people who can't afford the \$175.

Compost: Bears do not bother some compost. Residents have different methods that work for them, but often they don't work for everyone. We've had very good results from keeping sweet things, such as fruit and carrots, out of the compost. Otherwise, electric fences work great.

The Critical Missing Factors

Some people point out that we can never put electric fences around all the fruit trees, or even a majority of them. It's true that we cannot hope for a perfect solution, but it is very worthwhile to *reduce* the amount of bear foods available, because that will reduce the number of bears and how long they stay.

For many years there was an open garbage dump outside of New Denver that drew numerous bears, but the bear problems in town were not so bad. Bears that were becoming a problem were live trapped and relocated out in the bush. Critics of this method say that the bears come back, or get killed for intruding on the territory of other bears, but that is not true for all bears. Many survive relocation and, if they are trapped when they first appear and not after they have become habituated to human food, they do not return.

The magnitude of the fruit problem, and the fact that the villagers value their fruit and the trees that provide it, calls for measures that only the provincial, regional and/or municipal governments can give us. These include:

- 1. A restoration of the Conservation Officer staff to previous levels before the Nakusp office was closed and Castlegar staff slashed.**
- 2. A return to live-trapping and translocating bears to remote areas, with the goal of catching them before they become severely habituated.**
- 3. A full-time, trained, paid person to carry out bear-aversion techniques.**
- 4. A garbage management system like those at Canmore and Banff, with neighborhood bear-proof dumpsters.**

General Safety Risks of Black Bears

According to *Bear Attacks* (2002), a book by Canada's most well-known bear biologist, Stephen Herrero, there are about 600,000 black bears and 60,000 grizzly bears in North America. Each year they come close to people millions of times.

Over 20 years from 1960 to 1980, black bears caused over 500 injuries in North America. Most of the injuries occurred in national parks, where millions of people visit each year, and many come in close contact with "panhandler" bears. At least 90 percent of the injuries were minor (requiring less than 24 hours in hospital), and were attributed to bears habituated to people and conditioned to eat human foods. Herrero witnessed tourists patting bears and making them dance on their hind legs to be hand-fed tidbits of food. He says this pattern reflects the ability of black bears to develop a tolerance for people.

Only 35 cases out of more than 500 black bear-inflicted injuries were major, including 23 deaths. Most major or fatal injuries to humans from black bears occurred outside of parks and were predatory attacks by wild bears in rural or remote areas. To take a look at more recent statistics, Herrero found that black bears killed 11 people over the whole of North America during the 1990s. That's an average of 1.1 people a year. Statistics for 20 years, from 1977 to 1998, show that dogs killed 250 people in North America. That's an average of 12.5 people a year.

To focus on BC, where people-bear contacts are more numerous, over ten years from 1985 to 1996, black bears caused four deaths and 30 injuries (Ciarniello, 1997).

The first principle of safe co-existence with bears is to respect their space. Keep a good distance away. Remember that bears are unpredictable, and a single swipe with a paw can do major damage. Nature's laws don't give anyone a safe pass to chase an animal two or three or four times their size. Refusing to move is common behaviour for the heavily habituated bear. And there is always a chance, albeit slight, that

the bear will chase back, though it would likely be a bluff. Chasing bears out of town is only for people who have had expert training.

If bears spend time on your property, it's a good idea to have a bear spray on hand. Bear spray is important for walking on trails. A bear spray would likely have saved the dogs in the recent incident up Carpenter Creek without the owner beating on the bear. The injury that resulted is part of a pattern in which 90% of the injuries by human-habituated bears are minor. But it's important to remember that the other 10% are major.

Herrero states: "Children (especially those twelve and under) should be carefully tended when bears are around. In rural areas, black bears and children may end up sharing berry patches or children's play areas and, while such situations seldom lead to injury because black bears will normally move or flee, they have at least four times led to children being killed. Most rural dwellers know the woods well enough not to panic over black bears' danger to children. Our four children all grew up playing in bear country. I have always watched them carefully, however, and have kept them close when I knew that black bears were nearby."

In the Slocan Valley, generations of children have been raised or come here as visitors, and only one has ever been attacked. The first line of defense for our children is to practice Bear Smart principles. We should also be asking the governments to recognize our efforts to solve the problems, and help us out with the measures we've recommended.

A petition asking the government for live capture and relocation of bears can be signed at the Valhalla Arts Gallery on Main Street of New Denver or call 358-2333.

Valhalla Wilderness Society

PO Box 329, New Denver, British Columbia, V0G 1S0
Phone: 250-358-2333; vws@vws.org; www.vws.org