

Let's get back to the basics to avoid conflicts with bears



Your Turn
Frances Figart
Guest columnist

Sequoia and Redwood national parks have their giant trees. Yellowstone has the Great Fountain Geyser; Yosemite has Half Dome. For Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as many communities in its vicinity, the icon is the black bear.

Unlike large rocks, trees and fountains, bears move around and know no boundaries. When they lose their fear of humans and get too close for comfort, they are usually looking for food.

"The majority of our human-bear conflicts happen May through August," says Bill Stiver, supervisory wildlife biologist in the Smokies. "As our park resumes operations in stages, we expect to be seeing bears on trails and in back-country campsites. Even though visitors have been absent a good deal for the past two months, problems still exist in park gateway communities."

Black bears are highly intelligent. They have excellent long-term memory and their ability to make connections and draw associations is highly evolved. Bears are also opportunists; they eat what is readily available. They have one hundred times more olfactory receptors than we have—so they can smell the trail mix in your backpack or Cliff bar in your car and can tell that you have been hiking on a trail 14 hours after you're long gone.

"Our most challenging issues with

bear management are food and garbage, and the large home ranges of bears," says Stiver. "We can't manage bears in a vacuum. They often leave the park and go to gateway communities, where they get into garbage if people don't secure it in bear resistant garbage containers."

The Smokies' bear population has grown from 600 in the 1990s to approximately 1,600 today. Over the same time period, the human population doubled in Sevier County, TN, home to Gatlinburg—and park visitation soared to a record 12.5 million last year. Add to these rising populations the increasing development to support them, and the issue intensifies.

Coexisting in Asheville

These same factors affect Asheville and its satellite communities. Buncombe County provides good bear habitat due to its unique location along the Blue Ridge Mountains and is no different than Sevier County when it comes to the potential for human-bear conflict. Just this past Monday, May 11, there was cub up a tree near Mast General Store on Asheville's Biltmore Avenue.

"Of the 100 counties in North Carolina, 41 percent of all our bear-related phone calls originate from Buncombe County," says Colleen Olfenbuttel, wildlife management biologist with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. "Buncombe County's human population and development have increased over the past 20-plus years and, during that time, the bear population has increased as well."

How do we coexist? It's time to get back to these BearWise Basics:

- Never feed or approach bears
- Secure food, garbage and recycling
- Remove bird feeders when bears are active

- Never leave pet food outdoors
- Clean and store grills
- Alert neighbors to bear activity

To keep bears wild, maintain 50 yards' distance and do not leave your food accessible to them. When one person in the neighborhood feeds bears or allows food to allure them, that causes issues for everyone else in the area—and is nearly always a death sentence for the bears.

Living near bears is a human privilege that brings great responsibility. Local Gatlinburg business owners working with the National Parks Conservation Association and Great Smoky Mountains Association are launching the Smoky Mountain BearWise Community Taskforce to encourage positive behaviors that will minimize the potential for human-bear conflicts in the Smokies and its gateway communities through research, education, interpretation, and outreach. The NC Wildlife Resources Commission also encourages communities and businesses to be BearWise, with particular focus in the Asheville area. Both groups have speaker's bureaus to help neighborhoods and educational groups learn more about how to be better stewards of our black bear populations.

"As more humans have moved into bear habitat, bears have shown that they can adapt to living near humans,"



A black bear is photographed in the Great Smokies. JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

says Olfenbuttel. "Hopefully, people will learn to adapt and live responsibly with bears."

Resources

■ If you see a sick or injured bear, bears in developed areas, approaching or following people, or tipping over dumpsters, contact the NC Wildlife Resources Commission Wildlife helpline at 866.318.2401 or email hwi@ncwildlife.org.

■ Information on becoming a North Carolina BearWise certified community can be found at ncwildlife.org/bearwise.

■ Request BearWise outreach material and speakers at bearwise@ncwildlife.org.

■ Get all the BearWise Basics at bearwise.org.

■ Read "Point of Conflict: Where bears and humans converge, bears nearly always lose" by David Brill in Smokies Life magazine Spring 2020, Vol. 14 #1, available at smokiesinformation.org.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Give essential workers a chance

"Will some people be affected? Yes. Will some people be affected badly? Yes. But we have to get our country open and we have to get it open soon." — Donald Trump.

It is National Nurses Day as of this writing. How many nurses, nursing assistants, doctors, dietary personnel, facilities maintenance personnel, phlebotomists, radiology professionals, nursing home care-givers, emergency service providers, municipal employees and ancillary workers risk their health and lives daily to treat and attempt to save the lives of victims of COVID-19 and to provide basic government services? How many nurses and nursing assistants have been in the right place in the right time to improve the conditions, even save the lives of patients in their care? These men and women could reduce the risk to themselves and their families by using leave or taking professional sabbatical. They go to work when many of us can afford to stay at home.

I am a recently retired firefighter. My wife is a nurse. We ask that you please act in ways that give every opportunity and advantage to our essential workers in their efforts to protect and serve us in this time of crisis. Stay home. Wear a mask. Do not endanger the well being of those who are most vital to your health. If you are dead from COVID-19, your investment portfolio is meaningless to you.

Ken Myrick, Candler

Protecting people over profits

It is appalling that President Trump has issued an order directing workers in meat packing plants to return to work without insisting that plant management implement adequate safeguards



that would prevent contagion of the coronavirus.

No human being is dispensable. Such Trump administration action is reminiscent of Hitler's action to round-up Jews, Romani and others for work till you die camps. We all need to speak up on behalf of these plant workers that are ordered and manipulated to work in a situation that does not protect them from infection by a deadly virus. For those who minimize the lethality of this virus, I recommend you watch some video about details of the most severe cases of COVID infection.

It is a horrible death. We would not subject our loved ones to the risk of working in such a plant and we should treat these workers the same. Every person warrants dignity and respect.
Terry Clark, Candler

Just the facts

I would like to ask Mr. Dave Evans, who in his letter of May 7, 2020 stated the current ratio of the mortality rate from the COVID-19 nationwide could be well under 1%. According to the Johns Hopkins web page the current ratio is closer to 6%, 73,431 deaths to 1,228,609 cases nationwide. That is twice the 3% originally projected for this pandemic. We have been lucky or blessed, however you want to look at it, to only have an 3.7% ratio in the Asheville area but it's

important to get the information correct before commenting.

Jessica Leeds, Asheville

Remember this at the polls

On May 6 the President told reporters that he was using the COVID-19 briefings as a substitute for his political rallies. He said that his insults to reporters were a way to keep the interest of the viewers. He liked the opportunity to talk directly to the American people without being filtered by the press.

What the President does not seem to understand is that an unfiltered Donald Trump is a two edged sword. Like at his political rallies, it is only the "true believers" who appreciate his antics. Using demeaning language, showing disdain for a free press, telling demonstrable falsehoods, and, let's be honest, saying some really stupid things, are a turnoff for those who are not among the diminishing number of Trump supporters. President Trump was even bragging about the TV ratings of the briefings, but didn't realize that this only meant that more Americans were seeing his erratic behavior and utter incompetence.

Hopefully Trump's total lack of qualifications for the presidency will be remembered next November when we go to the polls.

Duane Johnson, Hendersonville

Get over it

The hates just keep coming (i.e., an unusually insulting letter to ACT, May 4, about Trump and Trump supporters). Us dolts (deplorables, Nazis, racists, fascists, bitter clingers, etc.) thank him for providing a handy list of the local high-school hall monitor alumni association.

Now I'll be able to ignore intolerant, bigoted nonsense even more efficiently. Progressives already own most of American culture, education, money, and political discussion. Now the writer wants to control the ACT's editorial page, too? He and his proggy friends almost already do. They're never going to be happy in a pluralistic country, are they, where people can mostly say and do what they want without permission. Trump won. Get over it till you vote him out. Your coup attempt is falling apart, and you can't stand it.

Trump definitely wasn't my choice for the presidency in 2016 and wouldn't be this year if he had any kind of reasonable opposition, but I wake up every day and rejoice that Hillary Clinton still isn't president. And Joe Biden? Don't get me started. There's nobody home there, and ... I'm out of space. (See? Disdain goes two ways, and you can express a lot of it in 200 words).

Bill Barley, Asheville

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