

MOUNTAINS

Protecting iconic furry friends

Gatlinburg dumpsters, Asheville trash cans keep bears from human food



Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Columnist

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is home to an estimated 1,900 black bears — about two per square mile — with more than 14,500 of these iconic mammals roaming the four-state mountain region. Bears share their territory with increasing numbers of human neighbors, which can lead to conflict that turns dangerous for bears and people. Gateway communities around the park and initiatives like BearWise are working to address these issues, raising awareness among residents, visitors and businesses about best practices for wildlife conservation.

One such community, the city of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, recently committed \$2.8 million to eliminate what had been a dependable smorgasbord for downtown bears. The city is distributing 460 bear-resistant dumpsters to the restaurants, hotels and other businesses spread through its urban core.

“Gatlinburg has eliminated a really large non-natural food source for these bears,” said Janelle Musser, black bear support biologist for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. “So that’s really important, because that’s going to keep bears healthier in general, and it’s going to keep people safe too.”

Gatlinburg’s population has exploded dramatically in recent decades, whether tallied in terms of human residents, bears or visitors. Since the early 1990s, the population of black bears in Great Smoky Mountains National Park has roughly tripled, while the number of human residents in Sevier County, where Gatlinburg is located, has doubled. The short-term population has ballooned as well — the park recorded 63% more visits in 2023 than it did in 1990.

“That in and of itself is going to create more conflict,” Musser said.

Higher populations mean more chances for humans and bears to cross paths — and more trash luring bears into human communities.

The dumpster program rolling out this year aims to reduce those interactions. Implemented through a September 2023 ordinance from the Gatlinburg City Commission, the program provides \$2.8 million for 460 bear-resistant dumpsters, which the city’s sanitation department is now distributing to its customers. The city will own and maintain the dumpsters, while customers pay \$75 each month for trash collection and maintenance. The switch will be complete by Dec. 31, when the city will stop collecting trash from privately owned dumpsters.

The dumpsters are expensive — about \$6,000 apiece — but with a functional design that latches automatically when the door is closed, they’ve proven effective.

“Those dumpsters really are working, and you can



When bears learn to rely on unsecured garbage for food, they can become aggressive and dangerous, creating a risky situation for both bears and humans. PROVIDED BY SARAH ROBINETTE

see that just by looking at them,” Musser said. “They are covered in muddy pawprints.”

Gatlinburg is not the only Smokies city making strides to secure its garbage. In 2021, the city of Asheville launched a program offering its residents 95-gallon bear-resistant trash carts that automatically lock when the lid is closed. The program costs customers \$10 per month with a minimum one-year commitment.

“They have proved so popular, there has been a rotating waiting list since the program was introduced,” said Kim Miller, communications specialist for the city.

Asheville has distributed more than 1,800 carts so far, purchasing 340 more in 2024 and approving funding for an additional 340 carts in the new fiscal year. The city also works with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission to pursue and test third-party options, such as straps to retrofit existing trash carts. Thanks to “in-house” ursine testers at the WNC Nature

Center, the city determined that the straps are indeed able to withstand the bears’ attempts to overcome them.

“These locks provide residents with peace of mind knowing that their trash is secure and inaccessible to wildlife, helping to reduce potential conflicts and promote coexistence,” said Sanitation Division Manager Jes Foster.

Additionally, a free food scrap drop-off program operated in partnership with Buncombe County aims to reduce unwanted bear interactions while also cutting waste. It’s available in locations throughout Asheville and Buncombe County.

All these efforts seem to be making a difference. In 2020, the city received 182 bear-related complaints from its residents. In 2023, it logged only 28 such calls.

Keeping bears out of dumpsters may sound like a trivial goal, but it’s critical to preserving the health and

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Gatlinburg's new dumpsters automatically latch in a manner that prevents bears from accessing them. The \$2.8 million investment has had an immediate impact on bears' ability to access human food in the city. PROVIDED BY THE CITY OF GATLINBURG

Bears

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safety of both people and bears. Most bears prefer natural foods, like acorns and berries, a much healthier diet than the leftover pizza slices and french fries they might find in a restaurant dumpster. Reliance on trash as a food source can have more immediate, deadly consequences. When bears learn to associate humans with food, they can become aggressive and dangerous — putting humans at risk, but also endangering the bear's life by diminishing its natural fear of people. When such bears cause property damage and physical injury to people and pets as a result, wildlife professionals are forced to euthanize them.

"The dumpsters have been a huge improvement in guaranteeing that we can coexist with the bears, which is ultimately what everyone in Gatlinburg wants," said Marlee Montgomery, facilitator for the Smokies BearWise task force.

Montgomery, who in addition to serving as president of the family business Montgomery Amusements, is also on the board of directors for the Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce, said that the business community seems pleased with the new dumpsters. Musser concurred, saying that restaurant managers she's spoken with talked about "how fantastic it's been not to have to clean up trash all the time."

But the bears of Gatlinburg are used to finding their meals in town and that expectation won't change overnight. Thwarted by the new dumpsters, bears are likely to look for unsecured residential trash cans, outdoor grills, birdfeeders and unlocked cars. Those sources are more hit-and-miss than the dependably full dumpsters, but preventing bears from accessing them is still vital to breaking their reliance on human food. While no hard data is yet available, Montgomery reported an anecdotal increase in bear activity at trash receptacles other than the dumpsters, a "very enlightening" finding pointing to the widespread participation needed to address the issue.

"We thought the main issue was the dumpsters, but in truth, it's all of the trash," she said.

Bear management is not a new domain for Gatlinburg's government. The city has been partnering with TWRA since 1999 to reduce human-bear encounters within city limits. Over the following year, a city ordinance established a zone in which bear-resistant dumpsters and garbage cans were required and a TWRA rule prohibited intentional bear feeding in city limits, as well as within the Chalet Village North Subdivision. Since 2002, Gatlinburg and TWRA have split the cost of a bear management officer position, a trained TWRA wildlife officer who deals with conflict bear issues, educates citizens and visitors, conducts routine garbage can compliance checks, and guides city leaders on how to reduce bear attractants.

"The city has taken this very seriously for the better part of two, going on three decades," said Seth Butler, director of operations and communications for the city.

In the past, relocating problem bears has been a go-to management tool for wildlife officials, but the numbers show that's no longer a viable option. In 2020, for example, TWRA relocated 24 bears from Gatlinburg and euthanized nine, but its call volume for bear-related complaints didn't change "one bit," Musser said. Meanwhile, new research has shown that relocation is often a death sentence for bears — a study of 32 GPS-collared bears relocated between 2015-2021 showed that 62% were harvested, killed on roads or euthanized due to conflict with humans, while 22% simply returned to their original home.

Musser said she gets bear-related calls from "pretty much every part of Sevier County," but Gatlinburg is an epicenter for these issues — in 2023, 14 of the 33 bears TWRA handled and 154 of the 1,230 bear-related calls it received were located there. Five of these bears were relocated and nine were euthanized.

Gatlinburg's location at the busiest



A black bear peers out of a Jeep at Chalet Village in Gatlinburg. To prevent bears from breaking in to search for food, drivers should keep vehicles locked. PROVIDED BY S.J. GEIS

entrance to America's busiest national park, which also holds some of the best black bear habitat in the Appalachians, guarantees that humans and bears will continue to cross paths there. That's why, when the Smokies BearWise task force relaunched in 2019, it focused its efforts on Gatlinburg. In January 2023, the task force wrote the city a letter requesting action.

"For human safety as well as economic stability, and to protect this iconic form of life in the Smokies, we need to stop the intentional and unintentional feeding of black bears in developed areas in park gateway communities," the letter read. "We therefore request support from the City of Gatlinburg for city- and county-wide programs raising awareness and implementing bear-resistant garbage containers throughout Sevier County. With Gatlinburg leading the way, our hope is that other park gateway communities will adapt the same policies and ordinances."

In response, the city passed the September 2023 ordinance, which in addition to establishing the dumpster program slightly expanded the zone in which these dumpsters must be used.

"We hope that taking the steps we're taking of trying to be good stewards is going to be something that people can look at and say, 'Gatlinburg did something good there, to not only make their town better but to make sure the bears are kept safe,'" Butler said.

Musser and Montgomery both applauded Gatlinburg's efforts but said there is still more to be done to protect bears in the city. The next priority is to ensure that trash receptacles throughout the city are bear-resistant.

"Now that the bears can't find what they're looking for in the dumpsters, they are much more eager to expand their boundaries," Musser said.

Before advocating for new regulations, Smokies BearWise will explore funding options for trash can purchases. Truly bear-resistant products are expensive, and requiring their use without offering a program to defray the cost could impose financial hardship on Gatlinburg residents.

Managing interactions between the myriad bears and people flowing through Gatlinburg each day is a never-ending job, but the city is making progress — and leading the way. In May, the Tennessee Department of Transportation installed 80 bear-resistant trash cans along seven scenic byway routes, with 50 deployed to East Tennessee locations. The program is part of an ongoing effort to reduce roadside litter, which is also a magnet for bears.

"That was exciting to see," Montgomery said. "I know there's been some reluctance from the surrounding cities and counties to jump on board, but I really think that with what they've seen in Gatlinburg and how successful that's been, the tide is changing."

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokies-life.org. For more information about safety in bear country, visit BearWise.org.

Open convention possible if Biden drops out of race

Sam Woodward

USA TODAY

The domino effect of a nationally televised, disastrous debate performance has left President Joe Biden's prospects dimmed and his campaign scrambling to reassure voters.

Despite Biden saying he's not going anywhere anytime soon, speculation continues that he will leave the race. Several Democratic members of Congress have called for him to terminate his reelection campaign, and others have been publicly wary about his ability to defeat former President Donald Trump in November after appearing incoherent and inaudible on the national stage in June.

With the Republican National Convention kicking off July 15 and the Democratic National Convention Aug. 19, the public wonders not only who would replace the 81-year-old Democrat but also how such a replacement would be chosen.

If Biden decides to step down, his party needs a game plan — and fast.

One possibility is an open convention.

During the primary season, candidates earn delegates based on their performance in state contests. To secure the party nomination, a candidate needs 1,976 delegate votes. Biden has received almost 4,000.

There are two kinds of delegates in the Democratic Party: pledged and unpledged. The former must vote for whichever candidate in their party wins the primary or caucus in their state. The latter may choose to vote for any candidate regardless of their state's primary or caucus results.

An open convention happens when there is no predetermined nominee. This hasn't happened for the Democrats since 1968, during disputes over the Vietnam War. In that case, the process of finding a nominee would take place at the convention where delegates once pledged to Biden would be freed to cast their votes for whichever new candidate they wanted.

Both pledged and unpledged dele-



Conversations surrounding a possible replacement for President Joe Biden largely speculate that Vice President Kamala Harris would step up and take over the ticket. ELIZABETH FRANTZ/REUTERS

gates would cast votes at the convention until a candidate secured a nomination. Unpledged delegates usually aren't allowed to select candidates in the first round of voting in contested races.

How likely is an open convention? It depends on whom you ask. Conversations surrounding a possible replacement for Biden largely speculate that Vice President Kamala Harris would step up and take over the ticket. If Biden endorsed Harris and the party followed suit, the delegates Biden earned would be transferred to Harris, and the convention would operate relatively the same as if Biden were still running.

Harris, the natural successor as the country's second-in-command, fared better than Biden when polled against Trump in a survey released by CNN on Wednesday and could help Democrats secure voter blocs by appealing to minority groups, campaigning to be the first woman and woman of color to hold the high office.

However, Democrats run the risk of amplifying their already poor image of unity with an open convention.

Of course, this is all dependent on whether Biden decides to exit the ticket, and so far, Harris has stood behind his decision to stay in the race.

Contributing: Maya Marchel Hoff, USA TODAY



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