

MOUNTAINS

Living with bears requires humans to adjust



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Note: Even though our region's black bears are mostly in their dens this time of year, they have been the subject of many recent media stories as the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission proposes to open three bear sanctuaries to hunting in 2022. Many experts suggest to key to managing human-bear conflict is in more education for humans and modeling good behavior when it comes to food storage and social media posts. We are rerunning this Word from the Smokies from May 2020 about these issues.

In Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as many communities in its vicinity, our tourism-based economy is built around the wild nature of our public lands, aptly represented by the iconic image of the black bear.

Bears have excellent long-term memory and a highly evolved ability to make connections and draw associations. When they lose their fear of people and get too close for comfort, they are usually looking for food. But this is not their wild nature. It's a behavior they have learned — from humans.

As a ranger in the Smokies during the 1960s, when the park had maybe 350 bears, Bud Cantrell saw this behavior firsthand.

"It was just something regular back then for people to feed the bears, and you'd wind up with big bear (traffic) jams," he recalls. "We carried a big stick with us, and the bears were sort of trained. If you hit the pavement with a stick, they'd take off. When we had a bad bear, I'd bait it, get the bear and carry it up to the head of Little River and turn him loose. Soon, they usually were back."

By the end of the '60s, the park had instituted a program that prevented vis-



Today, the Smokies bear population has grown to approximately 1,900, many of which travel out of the park and into gateway communities to access human food. PROVIDED BY JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

itors from feeding bears. Today, the Smokies bear population has grown to approximately 1,900, many of which travel out of the park and into gateway communities to access human food. Farther from the park boundary, Asheville's bears are also thriving amid increasing human populations and development.

Today's human-bear conflict zone is further complicated by our ability to instantly share information digitally to huge numbers of people with the click of a few buttons on our smart phones or laptop keyboards. Some social media users and sites make it a practice to post images and videos of bears getting into trouble in neighborhoods — like jumping into a dumpster, opening a car door or getting into someone's refrigerator. These posts are usually framed to elicit laughter and humor.

"While it is always exciting to see wildlife and can appear comical to see black bears getting into cars or trash, we have to remember that these smart and

long-lived animals are learning and often teaching their young habits that will put their lives and people's property at risk," says Jeff Hunter, senior program manager with National Parks Conservation Association.

NPCA is one of several organizations supporting the Smoky Mountain Bear-Wise Community Taskforce, a group on a mission to encourage positive behaviors that will minimize the potential for human-bear conflicts in the Smokies and its gateway communities. Another is Great Smoky Mountains Association, headed up by CEO Laurel Rematore who traded views of black bears in Yosemite for bear jams in the Smokies to take her job in 2016.

"While at first blush those social media posts may be entertaining, the fact that the bear got access to human food is practically signing a death sentence for that bear," she says. "And who can blame them? I know once I've had a taste of French fries or potato chips, I want more too."

There are plenty of natural food sources around our region to sustain healthy black bear populations. But when we tempt bears by making human food available, and then post evidence of their bad behavior, we glamorize and promote humans supporting some of the most undesirable behaviors of black bears.

"These behaviors are irreversible and often continue to escalate," says Bill Stiver, supervisory wildlife biologist with Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "Often, wildlife managers have no choice but to euthanize bears that pose a threat to people and their property."

What can be done? 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.

"A wild bear is a magnificent sight to see," says Rematore. "We can ensure that the videos people share are of wild bears, not those at needless risk, if we humans will only behave responsibly."

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 ultimately threatens the bears' very existence.

"These bears are leaving protected lands, filled with natural food sources, to score easy pickings with unsecured trash," says Hunter. "Sustainable co-existence with black bears means that they can't access our trash as a food source. Once we correct that issue, things get better fast."

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Woodfin to seek applicants and hold interviews for new commissioner

Derek Lacey
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

To fill its second vacated Board of Commissioners seat in recent months, Woodfin's governing body will take a different approach than one that spurred concerns in October.

At the first meeting of the year Jan. 4, Woodfin commissioners weighed their plan to fill the seat of former Commissioner Jim Angel, ultimately deciding to accept applications, conduct interviews and hold a vote among the board.

Commissioners will compile one question each for an application, and any interested town resident will have until Feb. 4 to submit an application, and the commissioners will each submit their top three candidates.

That pool of candidates will then be brought in for interviews in a specially called public meeting Feb. 9 and the board will vote on who will be seated in Angel's place, and that person will be sworn in during the board's regularly scheduled meeting Feb. 15.

Sheri Powers, town finance director and interim town manager, said at the outset of the meeting Jan. 4 that the special meeting was called due to Angel's resignation and noted that the town's charter simply says the town board shall vote by majority for a re-

placement.

"You all have the authority to appoint a commissioner to replace the vacant commission," she said, noting that statutes don't go into great detail about the process beyond that.

She said the UNC School of Government recommends taking applications from interested people, creating a ballot of those the board feels are qualified and then the board voting from among those individuals with the highest vote-getter taking the seat.

"Given a lot of the criticism that's been in the media lately for other towns and for Woodfin, that transparency is an important part of what we all do," Powers said.

Therefore, the town staff's recommendation was that the town publicize the opening and ask anyone interested in the seat to submit a resume or letter of interest and potentially answer a potential questionnaire.

Commissioner Jim McAllister noted concerns raised recently about Fletcher's recent appointment process, saying commissioners want this process to be as open and transparent as possible.

"The reason we want to do it, we promised change, we promised transparency, we promised involvement and we developed this process to be about as open as anything we can imagine," he said.

McAllister, along with Eric Edgerton and Hazel Thornton, were sworn in as commissioners in December, after winning their seats in a landslide in November.

He said commissioners wanted to make this process as wide open as possible and will publicize it every way they know how.

"We hope we'll get a fair amount of turnout," McAllister said, adding that he feels people are energized from the change in the town, and goings-on like the upcoming comprehensive planning process.

Similar appointment led to lawsuit against town

Commissioner Theresa Stoker took her seat in October, after the resignation of former commissioner Don Honeycutt.

The appointment process, two weeks before an election with only 24 hours' notice and no applications from residents who may have been interested in the position, raised some concerns in the town, including among then-candidates McAllister and Edgerton.

It was part of a lawsuit filed against the town alleging a "pattern and practice of violating open meeting laws," and nearly led to another lawsuit being filed.

At the meeting, Edgerton suggested

each member of the board submit one question to be compiled into an application, which would be accepted for a certain period of time. The board would then determine who to interview prior to the board's February meeting.

The board decided Jan. 4 to advertise the openings, compile a questionnaire to go along with an application and schedule a special public meeting to interview finalists before taking the decision to a ballot for commissioners to vote on.

Edgerton floated a schedule of posting the application Jan. 7, accepting those applications till Feb. 4 and commissioners choose their top three.

Those top three preferred candidates would be notified by Feb. 8 they'd be coming in for an interview at or before the board's regularly scheduled meeting Feb. 15, he said.

"I think when you open it up publicly you might be surprised at how many you get," he said.

Some commissioners were reticent to conduct interviews, hold a vote and swear in a new commissioner all on the same day, and instead decided to hold the interviews on Feb. 9.

Derek Lacey covers environment, growth and development for the Asheville Citizen Times. Reach him at DLacey@gannett.com or 828-417-4842 and find him on Twitter @DerekAVL.

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