

Grin and Bear It  
by Lisa Doner

If you've been in New Hampshire this summer, you've almost certainly heard a bear story or two, and might well have one of your own. The bears seem to be everywhere just now and acting bold as brass. It's true, we have a lot of black bear in the state, but it turns out that the population isn't too far off of the sustainable target amount set by NH Fish and Game. There are an estimated 5600 bear in NH now, with populations as high as 1 per square mile in some places. Personally I love knowing that bears survive in the woods around me. It gives me a sense of hope for wildlife in general, that we can learn to share the world with them.

The black bear, *Ursus americanus*, has largely recovered from over-hunting and deliberate extirpation efforts of the 1800's. It is now a common species, as opposed to being rare, threatened or endangered, and this is a good thing for New Hampshire's ecosystems. Bears, as opportunistic feeders, eat whatever is abundant on the landscape, including many plants, insects, and small animals. This helps keep other populations in check. Their feeding habits and scat helps to disperse and fertilize native seeds, which, in turn, provide habitat and forage for other wildlife.

It's no secret, though, that bears can also be pests. Many now have cameo roles on social media posts, showcasing their high intelligence in opening car doors and overcoming many human obstacles sitting between them and a food source. Making trash "bear safe" is now almost a contest of wills between human residents and campers and these determined bears. But this is not a new contest. Remember the old cartoons of that smarter-than-the-average bear, Yogi, bane of the 1950's picnic? Even older is Winnie the Pooh, reminding us for 100 years that ever-hungry bears share our love of honey.

With so many people visiting the state, many are likely to be unfamiliar with best practices on how to safely reside alongside such charismatic, large and often curious wildlife. An important myth to dispel is that bears are inherently dangerous. They are big, weighing 300 pounds or more. They do have big teeth and big claws. But humans are not their prey. Across all of North America, black bears have only killed 61 people since 1900. Most attacks are not fatal and are defensive reactions to a person who is too close. But bears are intelligent. They can live 30 years or more and acquire knowledge throughout that lifespan. If a bear learns that certain houses, tents, farms, or cars are a source of easy food, they can become a "problem bear". Adult females can then teach their offspring about these food sources, perpetuating the problem across generations.

If you live here year-round, you'll be familiar with the guidance to take in bird feeders after hibernation ends. If you have chickens, or bee hives, or fruit orchards, you'll also be familiar with the risk of bear visits to those high-quality foods. You may not know that NH Fish & Game offers training on how to bear-proof your farms using electric fencing. They even have loaner

electric fence units so you can discourage bears that have become problems, until you can get your own equipment. They offer guidance on style, sizing, set-up methods, spacing and costs of different parts.

Paradoxically, while Fish & Game classify bear as game animals, and NH still has a bear hunting season that allows baiting and use of dogs, killing bears out of season or without a permit can get you a \$1000 fine. The season is limited to September-November in most years and is specific to different “management units” defined by the State as areas where populations should be managed to decrease, maintain, or increase the bear population. The dates and rationale for these management techniques is largely to prevent killing of family groups dependent on an adult female (sow), and to promote the killing of the more solitary adult males (boar).

I confess that I really dislike the use of hunting of any long-lived adult animal as a population management tool because it selects against the ones most capable of passing on survival skills to offspring, and of adapting to humans without becoming problems. I believe it does a lot of harm. But I do believe that bears could become dangerous if people in this state do not adopt a more bear-aware and bear-safe approach to living alongside them. We are lucky that the NH Fish & Game Department is ready and prepared to help you build that relationship.