

# **Bears Are Active; Time to Make Sure Your Home Un-Friendly**

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How does the Arizona Game & Fish Department (AZGFD) mark the start of spring here in the White Mountains? Bear calls! With the longer days and warmer temperatures, the bears are coming out of hibernation and are looking for food. If you, like me, have gotten into the habit of putting out your trash the night before collection day, now is the time to stop. From now until about December, you'll need to get up early and take the trash out on collection day.

Bears are lazy and love food so your leftovers or bird food is an easy meal for them. When you're in bear country, which can include both undeveloped forest areas along with residential and business areas, it is important to be aware of possible bear interactions and to reduce the chances for conflicts when possible. The occurrence of injuries to humans by bears is rare, however it can happen. Unfortunately, Arizona's first-ever fatal bear attack happened in Pinetop in 2011. How we act in bear country can ultimately affect the safety of others recreating or living in the same area.

The greatest attractant to bears is food and most human-bear conflicts are associated with its availability. In the wild, bears use berries, nuts, grasses and insects as food sources. Bears are also attracted to human-generated food sources, including garbage, bird seed, hummingbird feeders, pet food and fruit trees.

The department recognizes the potential risks to humans and bears and can spend a considerable amount of time and resources every year removing and relocating bears. Removing a bear does not solve the problem for bears or the homeowners. If the original bear attractant is not removed, it is possible that another bear will move into the area.

Garbage stored outside is the biggest bear attractant. A study was conducted by the town of Pinetop-Lakeside in the 1990's and it found that homeowners that left their garbage outside had a 70 percent chance of a visit by a bear. If the residence was near a thickly wooded area or at the edge of a housing development, the chances were even higher. By just storing garbage in a shed until the morning of trash pickup, the chance of a bear visit dropped to two percent, regardless of the location.

"If a bear becomes used to getting food from trash cans and other human sources, it's only a matter of time before it loses a fear of humans and begins to actively search out human food sources," says Bob Birkeland, field supervisor for the department. "At that point, the bear becomes a threat to public safety."

AZGFD has policies in place that guide the management of nuisance bears and other wildlife. The policy was developed by wildlife biologists and managers using science, research and best management practices. These guidelines classify bears into four categories, based on behavior, age, sex, and threat to human health and safety. The policy clearly states what the department's response will entail; including directing the public to remove the attractants and minimize interactions with bears, the potential for capture and relocation or lethal removal of a bear. Any bear that is classified as an immediate threat will be lethally removed. If an adult male bear is captured as a potential threat, it will also be lethally removed. The department attempts to relocate female bears and juvenile male bears. If a bear that has been relocated returns and continues to display unacceptable behavior, it will be lethally removed. For example, a female bear that has been repeatedly eating from bird feeders or trash cans would be trapped or darted, ear tagged and relocated. If she came back and continued with her problem behavior, she would be recaptured and euthanized. However, a mature male bear that regularly dines on a homeowner's trash would be lethally removed. There is no "3 strikes rule." Relocating bears sounds like a great, peaceful solution to the problem but approximately half of the bears that are relocated return to the "scene of the crime." Those bears are also released into quality bear habitat but, with Arizona's healthy bear populations, that habitat is probably already another bear's territory and the resulting competition for that

territory may result in the death of one of those bears. Bears that become habituated to human-related food sources quickly lose their fear of humans and associate people and their dwellings with easy food sources.

The black bear population in Arizona is estimated to be about 2,500. The population is managed through limited hunting with localized population goals set in black bear management plans.

Please keep in mind these simple steps when you're in bear country:

- Keep all trash inside a secured area until collection day. If that's not possible, keep food waste in a bag in the freezer and place those in the trash as close to collection time as possible.
- If you'll be out of town or are a weekend visitor, ask a neighbor to place your trash out on collection day.
- Take bird feeders down at night.
- Keep pet food inside or remove all uneaten food.

For questions or to obtain a brochure on living with bears, visit the department's Pinetop regional office. More information can be found online at [www.azgfd.com/Wildlife/LivingWith](http://www.azgfd.com/Wildlife/LivingWith).