
Two dollars

Careless picnics killing bears

Sloppy food, garbage handling drove 2024 black bear conflicts skyward.

By Christina MacIntosh
ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTER

Teton County's black bears had a tough 2024.

The county recorded a whopping 148 conflicts — about twice the annual average — prompting the Wyoming Game and Fish Department to relocate 10 bears and to kill six. Of the 148 conflicts, 127 involved unsecured human garbage.

Grand Teton National Park, meanwhile, saw 16 conflicts in 2024 — more than double the number from two years earlier. Biologists killed two bears and relocated five others.

Wyoming Game and Fish usually captures about 10 bears per year in Teton County, and Grand Teton captures one or two on average.

The plight of black bears and the recent slew of lethal management actions has gone all but unnoticed.

"I think we just don't get as bent out of shape or excited when there's a conflict with a black bear," said Renee Seidler, executive director of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation. "We're like, 'Black bears are fine. Their population is stable. There's a lot of them.'"

Black bear incidents in the park are likely underreported, said Justin Schwabedissen, the park's bear biologist. And though 16 conflicts doesn't seem like much, the steady year-over-year growth is cause for concern.

"When we see this upward trend that we've been seeing the last few years, that is something we're actively thinking about and something we're actively working to mitigate," Schwabedissen said.

This spring is already off to a rocky start for the black bears in Teton park. The same week that the depredation of Grizzly 1063's two cubs roiled bear watchers, a black bear was struck and killed by a vehicle. The park has also received reports of three people deploying bear spray on black bears. Park officials deemed all three deployments unwarranted.

Bruin backpack bandits

The Jenny Lake area has emerged as a primary hot spot of human-bear

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conflict. The area is prime black bear habitat, with ready access to water and natural foods including berries and ants. It's also prime habitat for human frontcountry users who wander away from backpacks loaded with snacks. Often, these people are having a picnic then going for a walk or a swim, leaving food unattended where bruins can easily snatch it.

"Our leading cause of human-black bear conflicts in the park currently is abandoned backpacks," Schwabedissen said.

One of the park bears euthanized last year was first relocated after getting into conflicts in the Jenny Lake area. It then returned, which is fairly common after a relocation.

The bear was then "involved in several food rewards right off, right in a row," Schwabedissen said. "All of those involved backpacks that had been left abandoned" by their owners.

The food-conditioned bear subsequently began seeking out more food, particularly via backpacks.

"At that point, we reached our threshold for where it becomes a concern for human safety," Schwabedissen said. "And we went into that area, found the bear and lethally removed it."

The park also euthanized a yearling black bear that had recently been weaned from its mother. The park is not entirely clear on the extent of the bear's food conditioning.

"I think we're still missing a few minor food rewards" in that story, Schwabedissen said. "Because what we documented with this bear were some pretty significant conflicts."

The young bear walked up to a visitor and sniffed her leg. Hours later, it was seen following hikers in the Lupine Meadows area. Making contact with a human limb was the bear's fatal misstep.

"That's a pretty clear threshold for us," Schwabedissen said. "That's becoming a public safety threat. We're not going to be able to tolerate that on the landscape."

Young, hungry bears

Like the leg-sniffing bear, all the bears captured by the park last summer were young.

"It all seems to be a certain cohort of black bears that are between yearlings and 5 years old or so," Schwabedissen said.

There is scientific evidence that younger bears are more vulnerable to getting tangled up in conflicts, said Frank van Manen, a preeminent bear scientist and former leader of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team. While van Manen is best known for his work with grizzlies, he has also researched southeastern black bears.

"When the mother kicks her offspring off and they go out on their own, that is, of course, a transition period for those younger animals, and they haven't learned everything yet," van Manen said. "They're too young to have figured it all out."

Mike Boyce, a large carnivore biologist for Game and Fish, attributes the bad year for county bears to dry conditions and a poor berry crop.

There's a strong correlation between poor natural food sources and high conflict, van Manen said.

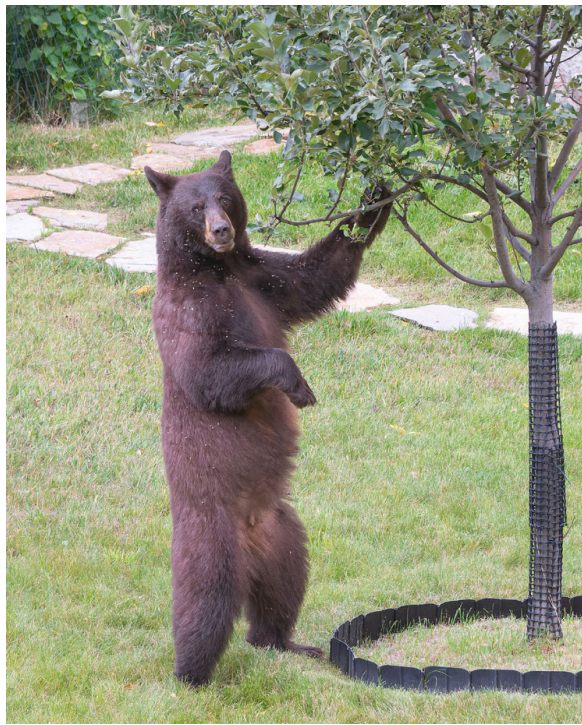
"Black bears still want to avoid the risk associated with human encounters," van Manen said. "But if they're not gaining the calories they need for survival through hibernation in the wintertime, they're going to be willing to take more risk."

But conflicts around Jenny Lake were not wholly driven by a lack of natural foods, Schwabedissen said.

"There were certainly some trends at the ecosystem level, but I don't think that was the case specifically in that part of the park," he said. "I think what we're just seeing is more



A black bear and its cub were caught red-handed getting into people's food in 2023 around Grand Teton National Park's String Lake. This year, visitors have already deployed bear spray at least three times to deter marauding bruins. Park officials say the sprayings weren't warranted.



John Heberger Jr. submitted this photo of a black bear in Jackson to the News&Guide's "Field Notes" section in September 2024. Last year was a deadly year for Teton County black bears, which get much less attention than their cousins, the grizzly bears.

people and more bears interacting."

Conflicts are a given for any human-bear interface because bears are smart and creative in learning how to get what they want.

"We're talking about such an incredibly intelligent and resourceful species," van Manen said. "It's almost impossible to have no conflicts when you have healthy bear populations and a lot of use by humans in this ecosystem."

The churn of visitors means that conflict prevention is a Sisyphean task. But ignorance isn't the only problem.

"There's a little bit of a knowledge gap that we're dealing with, and then just complacency and apathy," Boyce

said of bad human behavior in Teton County. "Some people just don't care."

Unsuccessful relocations

Of the five bears relocated from the park, three returned, including the bear that was subsequently euthanized. Game and Fish also euthanized five bears that previously had been relocated and found their way back to Teton County as well.

"They had been relocated and returned and resumed their bad behavior," Boyce said.

Relocations are challenging for several reasons, including that bears have a strong "homing instinct."

"No matter where you put them,

they try to make their way back" to the more familiar area, Boyce said.

It's also difficult to find a place for a bear that isn't already occupied by other bears, or where the potential for conflict wouldn't be equally high, van Manen said.

"Many parts of this ecosystem, the core of the ecosystem, is fully occupied by grizzly bears," Schwabedissen said. "So if I'm moving a 50-pound yearling black bear ... [grizzlies are] much more dominant and can push that bear around."

The park has started collaring black bears, both those that are captured for relocation and their conflict-free neighbors.

"We are trying to acquire a little bit higher-resolution data, movement data, to better understand how bears are using some of these areas," Schwabedissen said. "So we can come up with appropriate mitigation to potentially help minimize further human-black bear conflicts."

No tears for black bears

Despite Jackson's bear-loving bonafides, last year's spate of black bear removals hardly raised a murmur.

"We know, of course, around Jackson, that grizzly bears get most of the attention," van Manen said. "I don't want to put a judgment on whether that's right or wrong."

There are more American black bears than all eight other species of bears combined, whereas grizzly bears are an "iconic species for the ecosystem" and "represent something about the wild West that many people still try to cling onto," van Manen added.

Black bears are better at pulling off coexistence with humans.

"Populations have held up really well where grizzly populations did not under human pressure," van Manen said. "Of all the species of bears, black bears have been really the most adaptable and successful in that regard."

And they're no less sentient or intelligent than their ursine relatives.

"The scientist in me honestly thinks that black bears are as intriguing as grizzly bears are," van Manen said.

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