

Less precip, more bear conflict

Game and Fish reports uptick in bear conflicts in the region

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The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has dealt with multiple black bear conflicts in Johnson and Sheridan counties this summer so far.

Two bears have been relocated and one has been lethally removed from the Buffalo area, according to Christina Schmidt, the Sheridan region's public information specialist.

Nuisance bear issues at lower elevations are often caused by young bears dispersing from their mothers, Schmidt said. Also at issue is food scarcity exacerbated by drought conditions.

"This can bring them into new areas and may result in conflicts," she wrote in an email.

Bears may travel more widely and into new areas in search of food during years with limited food resources. Lower elevations in Johnson County are currently experiencing extreme drought, which is the second-highest drought classification. The Bighorn Mountains are experiencing moderate drought. The Rocky Mountain region received record-low snowpack this past winter.

When Game and Fish receives a conflict call, personnel visit with the reporting party by phone to give guidance on securing animal attractants to prevent continued conflict. Personnel sometimes visit in person to view the site of the conflict and decide if a management action is warranted. There are a lot of items that can attract bears, including bird feeders, pet and livestock feed, barbecue grills and garbage, according to the agency.



Bulletin file photo

In July 2023, a juvenile black bear wandered into the Willow Grove Cemetery and was eventually tranquilized and relocated. Scarce food sources have increased bear conflicts this summer.

It's recommended that in areas where conflict is ongoing or likely, residents secure garbage inside a hard-sided structure such as a garage or shed.

Zach Turnbull, Buffalo-based Game and Fish biologist, said that each situation is unique. Management actions range from securing attractants, to relocation or lethal removal of individual bears.

"These decisions are based on various factors including bear behavior, conflict history, age, location and the health of the bear," he wrote in an email. "While relocation is often preferred to lethal removal, success and suitability are often based on conflict history and behavior."

Relocation is more successful when a bear has had limited time to access human-provided attractants, Turnbull said. Bears that seek and find human

foods over a longer period of time become habituated and therefore are not suitable for relocation.

A relocated bear may return to the place it was captured because that location is a known food source, or it could seek out human-provided food and create conflicts in the area it is relocated to.

"This makes it very important for homeowners to call Game and Fish as soon as a conflict occurs, rather than waiting," he said.

After a bear has repeatedly received food made available by humans, its behavior changes. It seeks out areas near humans expecting to find food there, which creates safety concerns, according to Game and Fish.

The majority of conflicts have been reported in the Story, Big Horn, Dayton and

Sheridan areas, Schmidt said.

A 4-year-old male black bear was trapped on Brinton Road in Big Horn on July 10 and later lethally removed after frequenting residential areas and receiving repeated food rewards. The week leading up to that removal, residents reported several incidents of tipped-over garbage cans in the area and a sighting.

Not only are bears seeking accessible food sources, but other wildlife, including ungulates, are also on the hunt for nutrition amid drought conditions. Animals may move more often and into new areas in search of more succulent or nutritious forage, including irrigated land or residential areas, Schmidt said.

Turnbull said that numbers and issues with deer and antelope are so far similar to recent years.

In the mountains

While the majority of conflicts that Game and Fish has responded to so far this summer have been at lower elevations, at least one higher-profile, unusual incident was reported in the Bighorn Mountains.

The Bighorn National Forest has had a wildlife attractant storage requirement since 2023. According to previous Bulletin reporting, visitors being required to store food, trash and other attractants in bear resistant containers has yielded positive results so far.

Earlier this month, two campers reported that a black bear tried to enter their tents while they were camping near Fool Creek in the Bighorn Mountains outside of Dayton, according to a Game and Fish news release. The campers recounted the July 6 encounter in a Facebook post in a group called "Beauty of the Bighorns" and their story was picked up by state and national outlets, including Outside Magazine.

"We took all the precautions to pack up all food and drinks and nothing in our tents, but the bear went straight for us and our tents," one of the campers, Shonna Dehl, wrote on Facebook. "It would not be detoured and we had to abandon camp in the middle of the night but the bear still came back and completely destroyed our tents."

Game and Fish personnel quickly set traps in the area to capture and lethally remove the bear. Staff monitored the traps overnight, and no other campers reported conflicts.

Game and Fish encourages both residents and visitors to visit its Bear Wise website, <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/wyoming-wildlife/large-carnivore/bear-wise-wyoming>, for information on living and recreating in bear country.