

*New York's bear population is on the rise. At the same time, human development has expanded further into bear habitat.*



# BEAR with us

By Alex Hyatt

**W**hat would you do if you saw a black bear rambling through your back yard?

This question faces a larger number of New Yorkers each year. With increasing bear populations, DEC wildlife biologists are confronted with a growing challenge of educating the public about what to do when encountering a bear and how to avoid problem situations.

It's not an easy task, according to DEC's bear management team, a group comprised of DEC bear specialists from across the state. In fact, a study conducted to judge the effectiveness of the bear team's efforts to educate the public showed it was hard to get people to do their part to avoid conflicts with bears.

"Very few people changed their actions after being given information. And while the study documented some individual-level change, community-wide change

is critical in reducing bear attractants and thus effectively decreasing bear-human conflicts," said Jeremy Hurst, DEC's big game biologist in Albany.

To combat the problem, DEC produced a new DVD that provides tips on how to keep back yards free of attractants, and practical advice on what to do when encountering a bear. It also provides a wealth of information about the black bear, one of New York's most misunderstood mammals.

### What Causes Bear-Human Conflicts?

Bear-human conflicts typically occur when people inadvertently give bears a food source. Bears can become conditioned and will return again and again to an area where they have previously found food. In those suburban areas that are close to bear habitat, the path of least resistance for a bear to find food is often a bird feeder, garbage can or an outdoor pet food dish.



Send comments to:  
 Black Bear Management NYSDEC  
 Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources  
 625 Broadway, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Albany, NY 12233-4754  
 or fwwildlife@gw.dec.state.ny.us

## Bear Tales Wanted

Black bears have increased their range substantially in New York during the past decade. While bears are occasionally seen in every upstate county, the map details the primary areas where black bears occur. (These ranges are based on records of breeding female bears.)

If black bear populations continue to expand, the potential for bear-human conflicts increases. This poses a management challenge for DEC, who needs to find a balance between an increasing and expanding bear population and minimizing conflict.

DEC would like your input on the impacts of black bears living in your area. If you have any comments about bears in your area, let us hear from you.

“Anywhere there are bears and people that intentionally or unintentionally provide a potential food source, there can be problems,” Hurst said.

Even a dirty barbecue grill can attract bears from miles away. Keeping garbage contained, cleaning up cooking areas, removing bird feeders during spring and summer, and being careful not to leave food outdoors are important steps that help avoid most problematic bear situations.

Biologists point out that during a dry summer—when bear’s natural food sources are diminished—the potential for conflicts increases. “Since black bears adjust their habits according to where they can find food, if you eliminate the food source, you can usually avoid a problem situation,” explained Lou Berchielli, DEC’s wildlife damage specialist.

In some cases, biologists may undertake a series of aversive actions to discourage bears from returning to certain human environments. These steps include harassment with noisemakers, the use of pepper sprays specifically designed for bears, shooting the bear with non-lethal rubber bullets, and if necessary, capture and relocation. Relocating problem bears, however, rarely works in the long run, Berchielli said, because relocated bears will usually return to their home range. Sometimes repeat offenders must be put down.

### Increased Opportunities for Sportsmen

Another option available to wildlife managers is to reduce bear populations through hunting. “Hunting is the most effective tool DEC has to reduce bear populations and so is essential for reducing bear-human conflicts,” said Hurst.

To that end, DEC continuously assesses, and adjusts if necessary, bear hunting seasons and areas as one method of managing the state’s bear population. To get a handle on the current size of the state’s bear population and bear-human conflicts, DEC uses a variety of management

tools, including public input. This input is important in identifying impacts associated with bears, and biologists use this input to help determine what management actions will be taken, such as expanding bear hunting areas or adjusting season dates.

Since 2004, DEC has expanded hunting opportunities in the southern range to increase the black bear harvest and reduce bear-human conflicts.

For more information about black bears in New York, and for information about the bear hunting seasons, visit [www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov).

**Alex Hyatt** is assistant editor of *Conservationist*. He lives in North Greenbush.

### DEC Releases Award-winning Bear DVD

DEC and its partners confront the challenges of black bear management head-on in a new DVD entitled *Living with New York Black Bears*. Funded by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the award-winning DVD is available at public libraries and DEC regional offices across the state.



Food, from garbage to bird seed to barbecue grills, will attract bears.