

Spring Is an active time for Tahoe bear cubs and yearlings

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As temperatures start to warm and snow begins to melt, a new crop of bear cubs are emerging from winter dens with their mothers. Yearlings, which were born last year, are also on the move. Some are still with their mother bears, some are solo after separating before denning, and some may be showing signs of disease.

Cubs of the year, born around the beginning of February, are sticking close to their mothers, and learning survival skills in the wild to prepare them for living on their own in about one year. For those cubs born a little over a year ago, now called yearlings, it is time for them to part ways with their mother bears and sibling bears. Mother bears, once free of these “teenagers,” will once again find a mate and breed to continue the cycle of producing cubs every other year.

Cubs of the year are dependent on their mothers and are being taught how to forage on natural vegetation, including grass, berries, grubs, and other wild bear foods. Mother bears may be protective of the cubs, so people need to give them space. Never get in between a mother bear and her cubs. If you see a cub of the

year alone, or up a tree for safety, the mother bear may not want to leave the area, so back away and give them room to reunite.

This time of year, wildlife agencies receive many calls from people concerned that they have found an orphaned cub when they are actually seeing a yearling that is safely on its own. A good rule of thumb for knowing the difference is to look at the size of the bear. If the bear is the size of a cat (around 10-15 pounds), it is a new cub of the year and chances are the cub's mother bear is somewhere nearby or she may have sent her cubs up a tree while she goes to forage. Keep an eye on the cub and if you do not see the mother bear after a few hours, please call the appropriate state wildlife agency below so they can send a wildlife professional out to assess the situation. Yearlings on the other hand, normally weigh between 50-150 pounds and are well equipped to make it on their own and do not need handouts or human intervention.

Something that seems to be reported to wildlife managers more each year are undersized cubs and yearlings, often orphaned and malnourished, and sometimes behaving oddly for a wild animal. These young bears tend to be alone, small for their age, are often skinny with no fear of people, reluctant or unable to flee, and exhibit habituated behaviors often described as "dog-like."

"These could just be hungry orphans looking for food, but increasingly we are seeing signs of neurologic disease like a slight head tilt or tremors," said Dr. Brandon Munk, senior wildlife veterinarian with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW).

Since 2014, CDFW and the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) have been investigating cases of encephalitis, or inflammation of the brain, in young bears in the Tahoe Basin and throughout their range in California and Nevada. CDFW and NDOW have partnered with researchers at UC Davis and Oregon State University to determine the causes of encephalitis in California and Nevada black bears. Researchers have discovered both viruses and parasites associated with the condition but have not yet confirmed the primary cause(s) of this disease.

"We think the condition is more significant as a risk for increased human-bear conflict than a risk to bear populations or to people," said Dr. Munk.

On occasion, a cub has truly been orphaned, which could result from a vehicle strike, or other causes of death of the sow. You may also see a small bear that may be showing signs of encephalitis. In either case the proper state authorities, CDFW or the NDOW, should be called to evaluate the situation and safely transport the cub for evaluation and/or rehabilitation. Resist the temptation to offer food handouts to these bears to preserve their chances of remaining wild and eventually being released back into the wild.

Picking up a cub too soon or while its mother bear is just around the corner can do a lot more harm than good. If the bear is a yearling, it is perfectly normal for it to be on its own. If you're not sure, don't hesitate to call a wildlife professional at CDFW, California State Parks or NDOW to ask. Check out this video on the Tahoe Interagency Bear Team YouTube channel to learn the differences between cubs and yearlings.

Don't teach these young bears to be comfortable around people! If they have gotten too close, make noise and try to scare them away so they don't feel comfortable and want to stay. While it's fun to see bears and even take pictures and videos, you're telling the bear that it's alright to be close to you.

Bears are smart and acquire learned behaviors based on their experiences. If they have a negative, scary encounter with a human, chances are they will try to avoid them in the future. Allowing bears to become comfortable around people can lead to unwanted activity, including breaking into cars and houses or approaching people who are eating outdoors. It is illegal to feed bears both directly and indirectly by allowing them access to garbage or food.

To report human-bear conflicts, bears that show signs of disease or orphaned cubs of the year:

In California, contact CDFW at (916) 358-2917 or report online using the Wildlife Incident Reporting (WIR) system at apps.wildlife.ca.gov/wir.

Non-emergency wildlife interactions in California State Parks can be reported to its public dispatch at (916) 358-1300.

In Nevada, contact NDOW at (775) 688-BEAR (2327).

If the issue is an immediate threat, call the local sheriff's department or 911.

Learn more about keeping Tahoe bears wild at TahoeBears.org and BearWise.org.