

Black bear put down to protect human safety

April 16, 2024



The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) has issued an advisory urging people not to feed wildlife, such as deer, because that seemingly kind effort can heighten dangerous encounters with black bears.

A black bear that officials said was intentionally fed by people in Cottage Grove, a small rural community near Eugene, has been put down by the Oregon State Police after it lost its wariness and began approaching people.

ODFW agents attempted to capture the bear over the last three weeks.

“During the first week of April, the bear cornered a woman as she attempted to enter her house and subsequently went to sleep on a neighbor’s front porch,” ODFW District Wildlife Biologist Chris Yee said. “These are not normal behaviors for a wild black bear and wildlife biologists considered the bear to be habituated to the extent that it would become aggressive towards people.”

At the request of ODFW, the bear was killed by Oregon State Police Monday night, April 1.

“This is not the outcome anyone wanted,” Yee said. “The actions we had to take were a direct result of people intentionally feeding this bear.”

The two-year-old male bear was first seen in the city on March 5 and was spotted repeatedly near people or dwellings over the last several weeks.

The warning

ODFW and Cottage Grove Police Department provided information to residents and warned people not to feed the bear.

“Bears that are fed by people lose their wariness and can become aggressive and pose a threat to human safety,” Yee said,. “In this case, the bear was being intentionally fed, had become food-conditioned, showed no fear of people when approached, and eventually began approaching people, presumably for food handouts.”

In March, ODFW and Oregon State Police served a local car dealership and employee with a warning to cease feeding the black bear. Under Oregon law, (ORS 496.730 and 496.731), it is illegal to either directly or indirectly feed bears and can result in a criminal citation, a Class A misdemeanor, by Oregon State Police.

Strong tendency to return

Relocation is not an option for bears that are habituated to food provided by people, according to the ODFW. Bears have a very strong tendency to return to the place they were captured – some traveling up to 50 miles or more to return. Bears that have become habituated to “human food” tend to repeat the same bad behaviors in their new location.

Relocating bears results in exporting the problem to another community if the bear does not return to the site of capture. Most habituated bears that are captured have to be humanely killed to protect human safety.

Habituated bears past the age of cub are rarely considered candidates for placement in an accredited facility or zoo. A bear’s age, behavior, and circumstances plus facility availability and space are all factors when considering the possibility of placement. The average home range for a male black bear can exceed 50 square miles and placement in a confined facility is often not considered a viable or humane solution.

Twenty-four fatal black bear attacks that have occurred in North America between 2003 and 2023, according to an article by Justin Hoffman and Alyssa Whoaa on wideopenspaces.com.

"The youngest person killed was a child six years of age; the oldest, an 85 year old female who had been illegally feeding bears on her property. The average age of these victims is 46," the article states.

Stay safe

ODFW urges Oregonians to respect wildlife and do their part to ensure that all wildlife, including black bears, and people coexist.

“A bear's strongest sense is smell and everything from trash cans to grill drippings can bring them to your property,” Yee said. “Bears also have a great memory when it comes to food. Not only will they remember where they have found food before, including trash, but female bears will also pass this knowledge down to their young. Intentionally or accidentally feeding bears can negatively affect multiple generations of bears.

According to the ODFW, all wildlife have specialized diets that coincide with seasonal changes. Food provided by people can negatively impact their health, lead to conflict and safety issues with people, and in some cases have fatal consequences for the animals.

“For the sake of Oregon’s wildlife and their health, please do not feed them,” Yee cautioned. “Living responsibly with black bears is possible and it's up to everyone to do their part to keep people safe and bears wild. Follow these tips:

Never feed or approach bears. Feeding bears, intentionally or unintentionally, will cause them to associate people with food. It is also against the law in Oregon (ORS 496.730).

Secure food, garbage and recycling. Please ensure that your trash and dumpsters are secure from bears by using commercially available garbage cans, metal bars over dumpsters, fully enclosed trash storage, or by storing garbage inside. Take trash out immediately before pick-up, not the night before. Wash garbage cans with bleach to reduce their smell.

Food waste is one of the strongest attractants for black bears and allowing bears access could qualify as illegal feeding if appropriate steps are not taken to prevent the issue.

Remove bird feeders in bear habitat when bears are active. Birds have plenty of naturally available food sources during all seasons which is why some species migrate in winter. Bears can be food rewarded from bird seed and suet in feeders leading to habituation and food conditioning, destroyed birdfeeders, and public safety issues.

Never leave pet food outdoors. This practice can easily attract bears and other wildlife, putting your pets and wildlife at risk.

Clean and store grills after each use.

Alert neighbors and ODFW to unusual bear activity (continued sightings during daylight hours, lack of wariness around people or pets, etc.).

The ODFW encourages readers to share the tips with neighbors, friends and family.

“A community effort is vital to preventing problems with bears and situations like the one in Cottage Grove,” Yee said. “One person who feeds or attracts bears, intentionally or not, can pose a risk to everyone in the neighborhood.”

Find out more about living responsibly with black bears at <https://myodfw.com/articles/help-keep-bears-wild>.

