



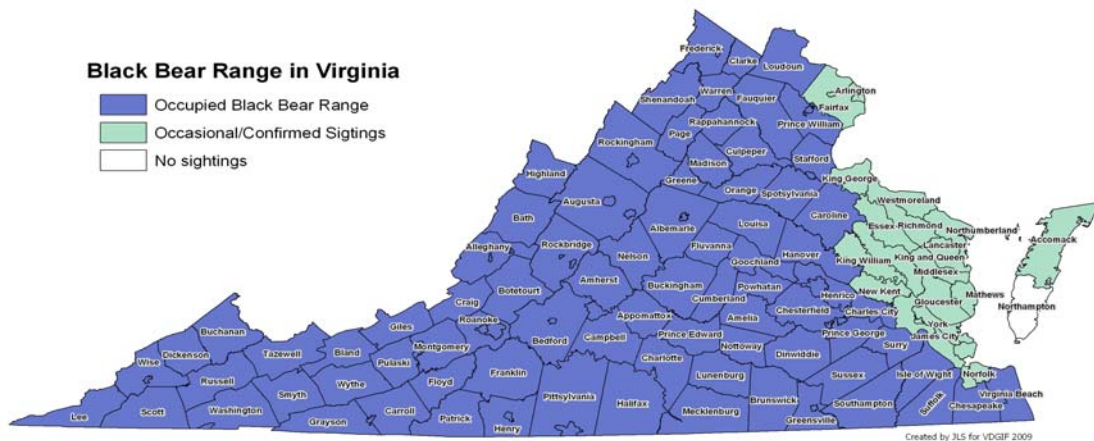
# Living with Black Bears in Virginia



Photo by Steven Ferguson

Black bears and human populations commonly coexist in many parts of North America. Black bears occur throughout most of the Commonwealth, and residential areas of Virginia are encroaching into forested lands and habitats commonly used by wildlife as human populations are also growing and spreading across most areas of Virginia.

## Where Are the Bears?



While the highest concentration of bears occurs in the Blue Ridge and Alleghany Mountains and around the Great Dismal Swamp, bears can be seen just about anywhere in Virginia. According to data from recreational sightings, hunter harvest, road kills, and VDGIF field staff, bears occur in at least 92 of Virginia's 98 counties and cities.

Many people enjoy the opportunity to see bears in the wild. However, when human-related foods become available to bears, problems may occur. Residents and visitors to Virginia can minimize negative interactions with bears by following some simple guidelines.

# Residential Bear Problems

Bears are highly adaptable, intelligent animals and may learn to associate human dwellings with food. Bears are attracted to residential areas by the smell of food around homes.

- **The most common food attractants** are bird feeders, garbage, and pet food, but grills, livestock food, compost, and beehives can also attract bears.
- **Residential bear problems may occur at any time of year**, but are more common when natural food supplies are limited, usually in spring and early summer or in years when nut and berry productions are low.
- **Most common bear problems have simple solutions.** The typical problems involve turned-over garbage containers, trash littered across the yard, bears entering dog pens or coming onto porches to eat pet foods, or damaged birdfeeders. However, bears that learn to associate food with people can cause property damage in their search for food around houses.

**If addressed quickly, problems are often resolved immediately. After a few failed attempts to find food, bears will usually leave the area and return to more normal wild food items. Bears have tremendous memories and therefore, they may return for as many as 10-14 days looking for these free food sources.**

If problems are ignored, property damage can not only get worse, but bears may lose their distrust of humans. Bears habituated to humans pose public safety concerns and may need to be destroyed.

## You Can Prevent Nuisance Bear Problems

Black bears have a natural distrust of humans, are shy, and usually avoid people. However, bears may be attracted to food sources in residential areas.

- **Secure your garbage:** Store garbage indoors, in a shed, in a garage, or in a bear-proof container.
- **Put garbage out in the morning** of pickup, not the night before.
- **Take trash to the dump frequently.**
- **Pick up pet food:** Feed pets only what they will eat in a single feeding or feed them indoors. Remove the food bowl soon after pets finish. Pick up uneaten food. Do not leave food out overnight.
- **Remove the bird feeder:** Bears consume seeds and nuts found in the wild, so bird feeders become a favored target for bears.
- **Clean the outdoor grill often.**
- **Do not put meat scraps or any other strong-smelling food in the compost pile.** Consider an enclosed compost bin.
- **Pick up and remove ripe fruit** from fruit trees and surrounding grounds.
- **Install electric fencing** to protect beehives, dumpsters, gardens, compost piles, or other potential food sources.
- **Talk to your neighbors:** Make sure your neighbors and community are aware of the ways to prevent nuisance bear problems.

# Your Role

## Prevention and cooperation!

You can help manage the Commonwealth's black bear population by keeping your property clear of food attractants and communicating with your neighbors to resolve community bear concerns. Remember, it is illegal to deliberately feed bears on both public and private lands. Even the inadvertent feeding of problem bears is illegal. Wildlife Managers don't recommend feeding wildlife due to concerns surrounding disease transmission and habituation of wildlife to human foods. In Virginia, it is now illegal to deliberately feed bears on both public and private lands. Bears attracted to residential areas or human dwellings due to feeding activities by people can cause problems ranging from nuisance activity to serious property damage. Regretfully, these animals often have to be destroyed.

### **4 VAC 15-40-281. Unauthorized feeding of bear, deer, or turkey on national forest lands and department-owned lands.**

It shall be unlawful to place or direct the placement of, deposit, distribute, or scatter food or salt capable of attracting or being eaten by bear, deer or turkey on national forest lands or on department-owned lands without the written authorization of the Director of the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries or his designee. The provisions of this section shall not prohibit the disposal of food in trash receptacles provided by the U.S. Forest Service on national forest lands or by the department on department-owned lands.

### **4 VAC 15-40-282. Unauthorized feeding of bear.**

It shall be unlawful for any person to place or distribute food, minerals, carrion, or similar substances to feed or attract bear. Nor, upon written notification by department personnel, shall any person continue to place or distribute any food, mineral, carrion or similar substances for any purpose if the placement of these materials results in the presence of bear in such numbers or circumstances to cause annoyance or inconvenience to any person, cause property damage, or endanger any person or wildlife. After such notification, such person shall be in violation of this section if the placing, distribution, or presence of such food, minerals, carrion, or similar substances continues. This section shall not apply to wildlife management activities conducted or authorized by the department.

## Respect the bear's space!

If a bear is on or near your property, do not escalate the situation by approaching, crowding around, or chasing the bear. This also applies to bears that have climbed up a tree. The best thing you can do is **leave it alone**. Because of bears natural distrust of humans, a bear that feels cornered will be looking for an escape route. By keeping people and pets away from the bear, you give it the best chance to come down from the tree and leave your property on its own.

## Report unresolved problems or damage

If you experience a bear problem after taking appropriate steps of prevention, you may seek additional assistance by contacting VDGIF or local law enforcement.

## The Department's Role

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) has established nuisance bear guidelines that promote public safety, protect property, and conserve bear populations. Whenever possible, the Department's approach to managing problem bears encourages the coexistence of bears and humans. The specific response to nuisance bear problems is determined by public concerns, public safety, type and extent of damage, black bear biology, animal welfare, and available control methods.

When you call the Department, an employee will discuss the problem with you. In most cases, a telephone call will be all that is necessary to find successful solutions (usually the removal of attractants). At times, a Department employee may visit your property to discuss additional options.

To find the VDGIF office nearest you, see our online [office locator](#) or call the Department's law enforcement dispatch at (804) 367-1258.

## Things to Remember in Bear Country

### If You Encounter a Bear at Home:

There are no definite rules about what to do if you meet a bear. In almost all cases, the bear will detect you first and leave the area. **Unprovoked bear attacks are very rare, and have never been documented in Virginia.** If you do meet a bear here are some suggestions:

- **Stay calm.** If you see a bear and it has not seen you, calmly leave the area. As you move away, make noise to let the bear discover your presence.
- **Stop.** Back away slowly while facing the bear.
- **Give the bear plenty of room to escape.** Bears rarely attack people unless they feel cornered or provoked.
- **Do not run or make any sudden movements.** Running could prompt the bear to give chase, and you cannot outrun a bear. If on a trail, step off the trail and slowly leave the area.
- **If there is a bear in your yard** and it approaches you, make yourself look big and make loud noises. Remain at a safe distance and throw rocks to make the bear feel unwelcome.
- **If there is a bear in your house** prop open all doors to the outside and **get out of the way of the exit.** Never close a bear into a room. Make noises and yell at bear to leave the house. Don't approach the bear but make sure it knows it is violating your territory.
- **If you surprise a bear speak softly.** This may reassure the bear that you mean it no harm.
- **Fight back.** If a black bear attacks you, fight back. Black bears have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars and even their bare hands.

### If You Encounter a Bear While Camping:

- Do not store food, garbage, or toiletries in your tent!
- Keep your camp clean.
- Store your food safely. Use bear-proof containers. Metal ammunition cans (\$10-20) and Bear Canisters (approximately \$50-60) are easily packed and transported.
- Keep your tent and sleeping bag free of all food smells.
- Store the clothes you wore while cooking or eating with your food.

- Burn all grease off grills and camp stoves.
- Wipe table and clean eating area thoroughly.
- Store food and coolers suspended from a tree at least 10 feet off the ground and four feet out from the tree trunk.
- Dispose of garbage properly. Secure it with your food and then pack it out.
- Do not burn or bury the garbage.
- Sleep away from food areas. Move some distance away from your cooking area or food-storage site.
- Store toiletries with your food; the smell of toiletries may attract bears.

Scents and use of perfume or cologne is sometimes an attractant to bears.

### **A Bear Outside Your Tent:**

If you hear a bear or other animal outside your tent make sure it is aware that there is a human inside by using a firm monotone voice. Turn on a flashlight or lantern. If the bear enters the tent fight back and yell. Many bears have been driven off this way.

### **If You Encounter a Bear While Hiking:**

- Hiking at dawn or dusk may increase your chances of meeting a bear.
- Use extra caution in places where hearing or visibility is limited, such as brushy areas, near streams, where trails round a bend and on windy days.
- Reduce your chances of surprising a bear on the trail by making noise, talking or singing.
- Make sure children are close to you or within your sight at all times.
- Leave your dog at home or have it on a leash.

## **Common Black Bear Myths**

**Myth: A bear standing on its hind legs is about to charge or attack.**

Fact: A bear stands on its hind legs to get a better view and smell of the surroundings. This is not an aggressive posture, just a way to determine who or what peaked its interest.

**Myth: Bears are dangerous predators.**

Fact: Although classified as carnivores, black bears are omnivores, and opportunistic feeders. This means that they eat both plants and animals. Over 80% of their diets consist of vegetation, fruit, and nuts. The remainder includes mostly insects and larva, carrion, fish, and occasionally small mammals. The majority of extremely rare predatory attacks are by male black bears in remote areas.

**Myth: One of the most dangerous encounters is getting between a mother black bear and her cubs.**

Fact: Because black bears can tree their cubs, it is rare for them to injure a person in that situation. Black bear cubs are great at climbing and will be sent up a tree if the mother bear feels nervous about a situation. The mother bear will either run off to lead the danger away or stay close by until the perceived threat passes. Just like with any young animals you never want to try to get near them. If you see a mother bear and cubs give them some space, be quiet, and retreat slowly.

**Myth: Bears are unpredictable.**

Fact: Bears use body language and vocalizations to show their intentions. Learning about bear behavior can be beneficial to people who travel in bear country.

**Myth: Bears have poor eyesight.**

Fact: Bears see in color and have good vision similar to humans

**Myth: Shooting or relocating a 'nuisance' bear will solve the problem.**

Fact: Removing a 'problem' bear and not the attractant will only create a newly available habitat niche so another bear can move right back in, creating a vicious cycle of killing.

## More Information

**To see the VDGIF Video Living with Black Bears in Virginia visit:**

[www.dgif.virginia.gov/video/living-with-black-bears/](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/video/living-with-black-bears/)

**For a printable brochure visit:**

[www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/living-with-black-bears.asp](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/living-with-black-bears.asp)

**For information and a guide on electric fencing, other information and links visit:**

[www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/)

**To purchase a bear proof trash can or enclosure model you may have seen at one of our offices, including dumpsters and retrofit lids:**

[www.bearicuda.com/index.php](http://www.bearicuda.com/index.php)

[www.dawginc.com/bearproof-can/bear-container.php](http://www.dawginc.com/bearproof-can/bear-container.php)

[www.bearproofing-r-us.com](http://www.bearproofing-r-us.com)

**Other sources:**

[www.bearproofcontainers.com](http://www.bearproofcontainers.com)

[www.bearproofinc.com](http://www.bearproofinc.com)

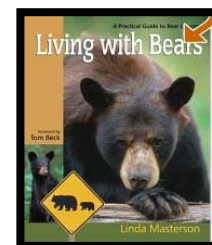
[www.bearsaver.com](http://www.bearsaver.com)

[www.unbearablebins.com](http://www.unbearablebins.com)

**For bear deterrent camping products and portable electric fences:**

[www.counterassault.com](http://www.counterassault.com)

**Recommended Reading:** Living with Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country Linda Masterson, 2006



**North American Bear Center:** [www.bear.org](http://www.bear.org)

**Bear Smart Community Guidelines and Bear Information:** [www.bearsmart.com](http://www.bearsmart.com)

**Black Bear Management Plan:** [www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/)