

Viktor's Comprehensive Report on Bears

By Penny Randell

It's Viktor here again with an all-important message for our mountain community. It's seriously bear season, and the beast of the forest is up and roaming. Now, no need to become fretful and terrorized, for bear attacks on people is extremely rare. In fact, these critters actually do all they can to avoid contact with people. With that said, it should be remembered that bears will eat anything, and garbage is a huge attractant. Once a bear discovers easy access to a food source, it will become less and less afraid to return to that site.

This lone omnivore, one who eats plants and animals, is scientifically known as a black bear, (*Ursus americanus*), which is a species and not a color. These bears can be brown, tan, or even blonde. The other brown bear, known as a grizzly, no longer lives in Colorado. Sadly, they were hunted to extinction in the early to middle 1900s. The last confirmed grizzly was shot and killed 27 years after they were believed to have been wiped out. This bear is known as the "Wiseman Bear," and is on display in the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

The black bear lives in mountain shrublands and forests, and subalpine forests at moderate elevations...your backyard, so to speak. It is estimated that the entire Colorado bear population is somewhere between 10,000 and 12,000. Over 90% of their diet consists of grasses, fruits, berries, nuts, plants, and acorns. The remaining is primarily social insects, scavenged carcasses, and again...garbage. Rodents, rabbits and young unwary ungulates, such as elk are fair game, as well. (Yikes!)

These guys are BIG! Black bears are anywhere from five to six feet long and weigh up to 600 pounds. Their powerful legs are short, designed for climbing trees. Because of this, clambering up a tree to escape one of these critters is not a good idea. Too, they are extremely fast and can outrun a human. Fortunately, they do scare easily, and yelling at them, throwing obstacles, and threatening them is the best defense if there is an encounter.

In March of this year Colorado Parks and Wildlife researchers concluded a six-year study on black bears. The study was practically unprecedented, for seldom have so many bears been tracked and monitored so closely. This Durango study even analyzed fur to discover all intake. Because of an increase in bear-human activity, it was first considered to be because of an increase in bear population. Nonetheless, it was discovered that bears are adapting to take advantage of urban expansion, and are not increasing in number.

With human expansion comes a shrinking of safe space for bears. After all, their population, like ours, is based on carrying capacity of the land. Soil moisture and plant productivity are directly related to the climate. These long, hot, summer days are hard on all of us who depend on the environment. Increasing carbon monoxide, rising temperatures and changes in rain patterns are serious threats to our kind.

Reacting to changes in seasons, bears tend to slow in winter, but are not true hibernators. However, both grizzly and black bears do go into a deep sleep during winter months, known as torpor. When a bear is in torpor he can be awakened, and will even snack outside the den. In addition, the animal's heart rate slows significantly, while body temperature remains relatively high. During this time the bear will live off body fat, but maintain all muscle. If a female is pregnant and doesn't gain enough weight before torpor, she can reabsorb the eggs to allow for her survival.

Bears are known to be as smart as primates. Experiments have proven that these animals, just like all sentient beings, are self-aware and have complex behavior. One study, composed of three black bears, revealed their ability to perform numerical tasks, including distinguishing the number of dots on an image. These studies were conducted with the use of a computer and offered a reward of food if the bear chose the right image.

But most important are the rules that you folks must live by here in bear country. First and foremost, never feed a bear! He will remember and come back expecting more. Keep all garbage in a secure building or trash receptacle. These "bear proof" containers can usually be requested for a small extra charge. Rinse all cans and jars before placing them in the trash, which should be taken to the curb on the morning of pick-up and not the night before. Don't leave pet bowls outside and bring in all bird feeders. Keep surrounding areas free from food, including fruit that falls from trees.

Remember to always be noisy in bear country so you don't come as a surprise. Talk or sing loudly and don't simply depend on a bell. Keep dogs on a leash when hiking, and avoid berry patches. Should you surprise one of these beasts, avoid eye contact. These boys aren't like us and aren't curious about your behavior; they don't care. Remember that with changing seasons and climate, these bears have it pretty rough. Keep a gentle heart and cherish all sightings from afar.

And so this is Viktor signing off. Be wary of all wildlife, especially when camping. We must keep our forests safe and can do so by following these few rules.