

## Nuisance Bears



*Photo of a nuisance bear taken by Greg Hood of the Greenhorn Valley View newspaper.*

A married couple sleeps peacefully in their Colorado home on a hot summer night in July. Their older son, Justin, is away at an Independence Day party. Their younger son, Chris, is sleeping in his room across the hall from his parents. This situation is a symbol of peace. A family that lives in the United States of America has the right to that type of freedom, a freedom that they have just celebrated this very day. But below them in their downstairs kitchen is a culprit who can take away their freedom, simply because he wants some coffee cake.

The dog is also sleeping in the same room as the couple. He is awakened by a rustling sound downstairs, and begins to bark, awakening the couple. At first they think nothing of it, as it is probably their son Justin and his friend, returning from their long night of partying and trying to get a midnight snack before going to bed. But then the couple hears the sound of

breaking glass. Immediately the husband and the dog dash down the stairs to investigate, and what they see stops them dead in their tracks.

There is a large bear in their kitchen, gorging himself on the blueberry coffee cake left in the oven, a jar of jelly, and a jar of candy. When the bear spots the dog, he charges it, viewing it as easy prey. Thankfully the dog escapes, and his owner is able to grab him by the harness and run up the stairs back to the bedroom, locking them in safely. Unfortunately the couple is now trapped upstairs, too afraid to warn their son Chris of the danger lurking below, and worried that Justin will walk in on it. Their only option is to call 911. When the deputy finally arrives forty-five minutes later, he spots the bear through the kitchen window with his flashlight, and scares it away. The bear climbs out of the open window that it had entered through, and hopefully will never return. The family was smart to not try to deal with it themselves, as they probably would have been gravely injured or killed in the process.

Though the above story is startling, it is a real experience that the Lewis family of Colorado City, Colorado had in the past month. Colorado City, Rye, San Isabel, and the housing development of Hatchet Ranch are all part of the Greenhorn Valley of Colorado, which is dwarfed by the looming Greenhorn Mountain. The bears that live in the area hibernate on the mountain during the winter, but they come down into the valley during the summer to forage for food. Unfortunately, the human population in the valley is fairly large and is becoming increasingly larger as time goes on, so it is inevitable that the bears and the humans will tangle. A local grocery store manager says, "I am sick of dealing with the dogs barking at the bears all night long. I have five or six bears that like to invade my property." A local sheriff's deputy states, "I'm getting tired of chasing after bears all day long."

It is an undeniable fact that here, and in any place where bears and humans must share the environment, the bears have the potential to become bold enough to break into homes and attack anyone who stands in their way. It happens through a series of events that causes the bears to gradually become less afraid of the presence of humans. They realize that they can take advantage of any opportunity afforded to them, and when the bears are hungry enough, this is often the case. While it is impossible to stop the bear from doing what it wants to while it is doing it, it is possible to prevent this behavior from occurring. In order to do this, we must realize the catalysts of the behavior and take steps to eliminate them.



*This is a bear that lives in my neighborhood (the housing development of Hatchet Ranch). The garbage dumpster he is raiding belongs to Edie Kellog, someone who lives just a few miles southeast of my home.*

In Colorado, bears come out of their hibernation period in late April or early May, and they go back into it in late October or early November. Between hibernation periods, they have an extremely ravenous appetite, as they need to store fat to sustain themselves during their sleep. Not only are the bears constantly hungry, but they have an amazing sense of smell. They can

smell a human from a mile away, and a bird feeder from five miles away. If this information is true, imagine how easily they can smell a garbage dumpster across a distance of several miles. This smell is most certainly the beginning of unwanted interaction between bears and humans.

After the first discovery of a garbage dumpster, the bear has the potential to wreak havoc on the property and neighboring properties. Not only will it break into garbage cans and dumpsters, but it can break into sheds that contain animal feed and steal bird feeders. If it continues to be successful in the same place, it will simply keep returning and it will become exceedingly bolder each time. This is when the bear becomes what is termed a “nuisance bear.” The next time it returns, it may even decide to kill livestock or pets that the humans own. One family that lives in my area lost a young goat to a bear. The teenaged daughter ran outside with a broom to scare it away, and though she was successful, it was too late. The bear had already killed the goat and left it lying in their driveway.

At this point the bear has lost its fear of humans and has become extremely aggressive and intolerably dangerous. If windows are left open or if the screen door is the only door closed (these are things that many people do during the hot summer months), it’s only a matter of time before the bear finds a way to enter the house, endangering the people inside.



*Though this bear has spotted the humans watching it, it simply ignores them and continues with its dumpster dive.*

The main reason that the bear problems are continuing is because people assume that they don't have to "bear proof" their property. They take on an extremely complacent attitude, or they feel that they have an obligation to continue feeding wild birds with feeders. The simple fact of the matter is that during the summer months, birds have an abundant natural food source of seeds, berries, and insects, and they don't need us to feed them. During the winter it is important to leave bird feeders out and filled, as there is a shortage for the birds during that time. The important thing to remember is the fact that bears hibernate during the winter, and they therefore will not be attracted to bird feeders. But during the summer, they will not only be attracted to the feeders, but they will continually steal them as they are an extremely easy food source for a hungry bear. Greg Hood of the Greenhorn Valley View newspaper states, "A mix of common birdseed contains as many as 2,600 calories per pound."

In addition to bringing in their bird feeders, people need to make sure they own a garbage dumpster or can that latches and locks shut. Simply strapping the lid down with a bungee cord or three will not help, as we can see in the above pictures. Edie Kellog, the man who had the privilege of photographing this bear, states, "**We do tightly bag all our trash before depositing [it] in the dumpster, but of course [it] contains food scraps.... Even strapping the dumpster lids didn't help.**" In fact, people should take curbside garbage cans and hide them in their garage so the bears can't smell them or get to them. People should also shut and latch all their doors and windows, because, as we have already learned, the bears can and will come into a house if there is an opening given to them.

People who cohabitate with bears should report bear sightings and incidences to Division of Wildlife authorities. These authorities will pinpoint nuisance bears, trap them, tag them so they can be recognized, and relocate them to a less populated area. Unfortunately, the bears

usually sniff their way back to civilization and continue to raid property. At this point, the bear needs to be trapped and euthanized. They don't receive a third chance.

This is why we, as responsible and intelligent human beings, must be aware of the potential that bears have to become too bold and therefore too dangerous. We must realize that their dependency on our resources is largely our fault, and we need to take responsibility for our actions and be good stewards of our environment by taking the steps mentioned above to “bear proof” our property and homes. Not only will we save the bears from a lifetime of confusion ending in an unnatural death, but we will save our pets and even ourselves from the danger and pain of being attacked by an otherwise harmless creature.

