

Bears of the Northwest

The majority of bear sightings in the northwest are typically in late spring, when the animals are active, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) biologists say. "At this time of year, bears have been out of their winter dens for a few months and are drawn to the ripening of salmonberries in low elevation areas," said Rocky Spencer, WDFW carnivore specialist.



Also, this is the breeding season for bears, and males roam large territories in search of females, Spencer said. They often move through areas occupied by humans and leading to increased sightings, he said. While bear sightings are not uncommon at this time of year, attacks on people are extremely rare. According to historical records, there have been four previous bear attacks on humans and one reported fatality in Washington.

"Bears are timid and will go to great lengths to avoid contact with humans, but they can find it hard to pass up an easy meal if it's offered," Spencer said.

"An unsecured garbage can that's full of table scraps, or a bowl of dog food that's left out on the porch is a strong attractant for bears," he said. "Eliminating these easy food supplies is usually all it takes to encourage a bear to move on and search for natural offerings."

Wildlife experts say homeowners can take several simple steps to reduce the likelihood of an encounter with a bear or other wildlife:

- Keep garbage cans in a garage or another secure area until collection day;
- Remove pet food from areas that are easily accessible by wildlife;
- Thoroughly clean barbecue grills after each use;
- Birdfeeders filled with seed are unnecessary this time of year and will attract bears. Birdfeeders should be filled beginning in the fall when natural food sources become scarce for birds;
- Never intentionally feed wild animals, such as deer, raccoons or squirrels.

Spencer said the first rule that hikers and campers should follow is to keep a clean campsite.

"Bears will follow their nose to a campsite, so reducing or eliminating the sources of those food smells is important," he said. Thoroughly clean all cooking utensils after use, seal uneaten food in airtight containers and store containers in bear-proof canisters away from sleeping areas.

If a bear is encountered in the wild, don't run. Pick up small children, stand tall, wave your arms above your head and shout. Do not approach the animal and be sure to leave it an escape route. Try to get upwind of the bear so that it can identify you as a human and leave the area.

Although rare, if the animal does mistake you for prey and attacks, fight back aggressively.

For more information on bears of North America visit <http://www.bearbiology.com/bbdesc.html>

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