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RHODE ISLAND



RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT
OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE

LIVING ALONGSIDE BLACK BEARS

A MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSE GUIDE



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This document was created by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Division of Fish & Wildlife. It is intended as a tool to educate the public on American black bear biology and behavior and to help prepare the public on coexistence strategies in advance of a resident black bear population in Rhode Island.

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SITUATION

- Black bears, once common in New England, were extirpated by European settlers from Rhode Island by the year 1800.
- Habitat restoration and wildlife management policies have resulted in the restoration of black bear populations throughout New England.
- Healthy population growth of black bears in Connecticut and Massachusetts has resulted in increased sightings of transient black bears in Rhode Island.
- With current habitat conditions and the increase of bears in surrounding states, a resident black bear population is once again becoming established in Rhode Island.

GOALS

- To provide the public with background knowledge of black bear biology and life history
- To provide the public with tools they can implement to avoid and/or mitigate bear issues on their properties and within their community
- To provide the public with an understanding of Rhode Island's current black bear monitoring efforts and how management decisions are made

INTRODUCTION

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), Division of Fish & Wildlife (DFW) protects, conserves and manages Rhode Island's wildlife and their habitats. In this mission, the Division is responsible for managing native and non-native wildlife species in the state, including large mammals like the black bear.

In recent years, population growth of black bears in Connecticut and Massachusetts has resulted in young bears traveling across state lines in search of a home territory. Sightings of these transient bears in Rhode Island have increased in recent years, with bears spotted in rural areas as well as suburbs and highly developed areas.

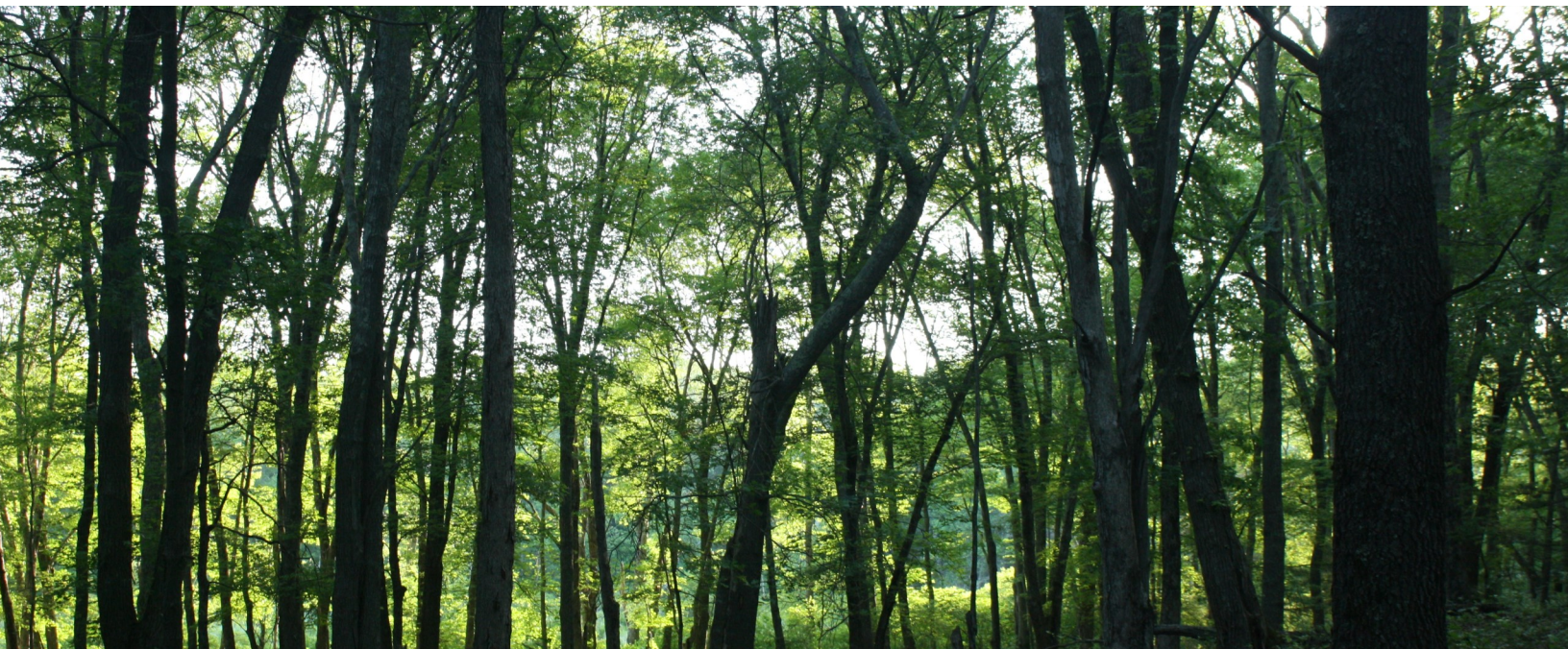
Bears are a natural part of the southern New England landscape, and their presence should not be cause for fear in the community. Knowing how



to adjust our own behaviors will help to prevent problems with bears. Encouraging respect for these large mammals and removing bear attractants will go a long way in preparing Rhode Islanders to be “bear aware!”

Black bears roamed the forests of southern New England long before the first European settlers arrived. Indigenous people utilized black bears as a valuable resource for food, clothing, tools, and decoration. During the ensuing period of colonization, habitat loss due to agricultural development, unregulated hunting, and persecution due to damage of livestock and crops brought black bears to the brink of extinction in southern New England. With the emergence of modern wildlife management practices and philosophies in the early 1900’s, bears and many other species of wildlife were afforded protections under federal and state laws. As farms in the Northeast were abandoned, regeneration of forests created more suitable habitat, allowing black bear populations to recover in recent decades.

Black bears are generally unaggressive, but can be destructive when scavenging from trash cans, bird feeders, vegetable gardens, farms, livestock feed, and commercial/backyard beehives. This scavenging behavior is often due to a lack of natural foods, primarily in early spring, during droughts or other factors, or in the fall when they are trying to put on weight for hibernation. Bears most often want to be far away from humans, and are naturally shy, but when presented with easy, tasty food options, they can become a nuisance. Bears that have lost their fear of humans have become habituated, which can create unnatural behaviors and potentially dangerous situations. The key to coexistence with bears is proactive behavior within the community. A bear can’t be blamed for wanting to shuffle through a trash can, but humans can certainly alter our own behaviors for the safety of both the community and our wildlife. In this guide, we will review the basics of black bear biology and some simple actions everyone in the community can take to prevent issues with these unique and charismatic animals.



Definitions

It is important that a consistent and clear definition of terms is used throughout this guide, and when assessing situations involving bears. What some may consider dangerous behavior may not be a bear displaying any dangerous or worrisome behavior at all, but rather exhibiting normal behavior. Understanding the differences in behavior is essential to proper management responses, for the safety of the public, and to avoid unnecessary lethal control of non-dangerous bears. The following definitions will be used for the process of categorizing human-bear interactions:

EXTIRPATE: Complete removal of a species from a geographic area; also known as local extinction

COEXISTENCE: Humans and bears exist together. Humans take an active role in helping bears in their community stay wild by removing attractants, taking responsibility for pet safety, hazing bears in their neighborhood and learning about bear ecology and behavior.

TRANSIENT: A bear that is temporarily passing through an area, not breeding or overwintering.

RESIDENT: A bear that is living permanently in the state, breeding or overwintering.

ATTRACTANT: A source of food or shelter that may draw an animal into an area.

HABITUATION: A change in behavioral response in which bears become accustomed to humans and human activity through repeated exposure.

OBSERVATION: The act of noticing signs of a bear, such as tracks or scat, but without visual observation of the bear.

SIGHTING: A visual observation of a bear. A sighting may occur at any time of the day or night.

ENCOUNTER: A direct meeting that is between a human and bear with no physical contact and that is without incident.

INCIDENT: A conflict between a human and a bear where the bear exhibits any of the following behaviors: growling, baring teeth, lunging/charging, or nipping without physical contact with the person. A human is not bitten or physically harmed.

LIVESTOCK LOSS/DEPREDATION: Bear kills or injures livestock or outdoor pets.

PET ATTACK: Bear injures or kills a domestic pet.

- **Unattended:** Pet is free-roaming, walking off-leash more than six feet from a person, or on a leash longer than six feet.
- **Attended:** Pet is on a leash less than six feet in length or is in the presence of a person less than six feet away.

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HUMAN ATTACK: A human is bitten or harmed by a bear.

- **Provoked:** An attack where the involved human encourages the bear to engage. Examples include a human feeding a bear, approaching a bear with cubs, or intervening in a bear attack on a pet.
- **Unprovoked:** An attack where the involved human does not encourage the bear to engage.

DANGEROUS BEAR: A bear that has precipitated a human attack or an *attended* pet attack.

HAZING: An action or series of actions that is carried out in an attempt to change behaviors of habituated bears and/or to re-instill a healthy fear of people in the local bear population

American Black Bear Life History

DESCRIPTION

The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the smallest of the three bear species found in North America, and the only species found in the Eastern United States. Though most black bears have black fur with a tan snout, varied coat colors can be observed across the continent. Cinnamon, blonde, and silver coats can be observed in other parts of the black bear's range. The most unique color phase of this species is the white coat color of the Kermode or "spirit bear," a subspecies only found in British Columbia, Canada.

Black bears with unlimited food supplies have weighed in at over 600 pounds. Average weight for males (boars) is 150-450 pounds; females (sows) average between 100-250 pounds. Black bears are long lived; healthy bears can reach 20 years old.

CURRENT & HISTORIC RANGE

Black bears historically inhabited all of forested areas in the United States, but after intensive European settlement, habitat loss, unregulated hunting, and persecution, their historic range significantly shrunk. Today, black bears can be found from Canada to Mexico and in at least 40 states.

BEHAVIOR

Black bears lead solitary lives except during breeding season or while rearing cubs. A male's home range might be between 12 and 60 square miles, while females only range 5 to 7 square miles. Adult bears will defend their territories against other bears perceived as intruders but tend to avoid direct confrontations whenever possible. Aside from a female with cubs, black bears are mild-tempered and will typically avoid interactions with humans.



DIET

Black bears eat a wide variety of foods including grasses, herbs, fruits, and nuts. They will also feed on carrion (dead animals) and insect larvae. Black bears will opportunistically prey on small mammals or deer fawns but are not physically designed for chasing and capturing prey. Black bears will actively seek out foods high in protein or fat, such as birdseed, pet food, livestock feed and garbage. This increase in available resources leads to larger bears, higher birth rates, and higher cub survival rates.



Photo: Bear scat, Liam Corcoran

REPRODUCTION

Female black bears usually do not have their first litter until three to four years old and then typically breed every two years. While males become sexually mature at the same age, they are likely not yet able to compete with older, dominant males for breeding opportunities. Breeding season for black bears in our area occurs during late June and July. During this time, adult males may travel great distances in search of females.

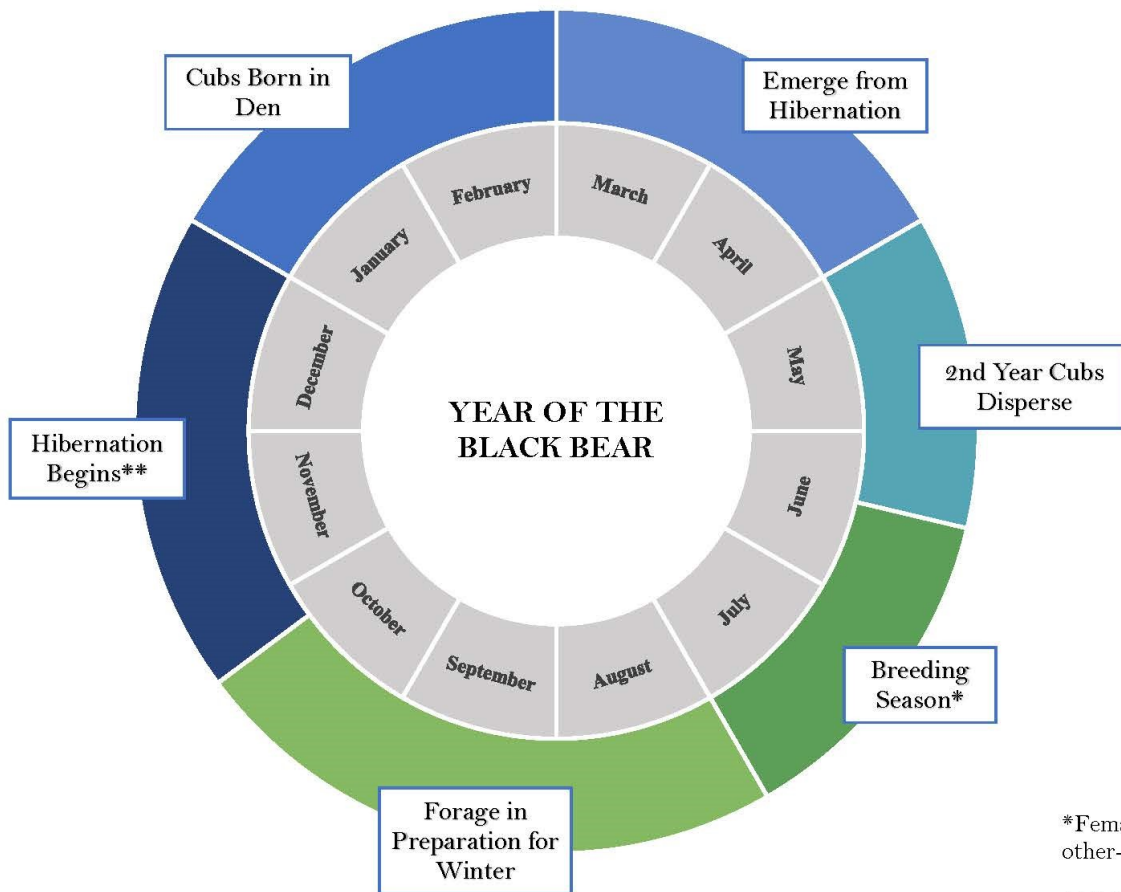
Female black bears exhibit delayed implantation, a process whereby fertilization occurs immediately after mating, but the embryo does not fully develop until a later time. Litters of around 2-3 cubs are born in the den in January or February. At birth, cubs are blind and toothless and weigh less than 1 pound. They are active and will nurse while their mother rests in her den until spring. Young bears either leave or are driven away by their mother in the spring following their second winter. Young male bears, away from their mother for the first time, often travel great distances looking for food and unoccupied territories. These young males often venture into residential backyards in the summer months looking for food. Young female bears typically do not travel very far from where they were born and tend to stay close to their mothers' home range.

HIBERNATION

Black bears are not considered to be true hibernators. Their body temperature and respiration rate decrease during winter denning, but not to the extent of true hibernators such as woodchucks and bats. Black bears do not eat, drink, or defecate while they are in the winter den and they can quickly awaken if they are disturbed. In the southern parts of their range, they may not hibernate at all, or may only do so for short periods. Winter den sites may be in large, hollow tree trunks, under tree stumps, brush piles, rock outcrops, or sometimes in or under man-made structures. The bears often line their winter dens with grass, leaves, or moss. In the northeast, winter denning usually takes place between November and March and females that are pregnant or with cubs enter the den earlier and spend longer periods in the den than males.



Black Bear Annual Life Cycle



*Females only breed every-other-year.

**Cubs remain with their mother for a second winter.



Preventing Nuisance Black Bears

“What do I do if a bear is in my yard or neighborhood?”

Assess the situation to determine if the bear is exhibiting normal, calm behavior, is acting aggressive, or is engaging in a nuisance behavior. (see Bear Interaction Assessment section).

- Depending on the assessment, determine the best response and employ deterrents if necessary.
- Contact the appropriate authorities for information, or assistance if action is necessary.

The first thing to do is assess the situation. Is the bear just passing through? Has it broken into your bird feeder or trash can? Has it approached people or pets, or attempted to enter a building or vehicle? These are all behaviors bears may exhibit depending on the number of attractants present in the area. Bear attractants are covered on the next page. Remember, a dangerous bear is one that has attacked or attempted to make contact with a person or an attended pet.

Decades of research into resolving nuisance bear issues has afforded us the understanding that coexistence with bears is possible, and the best way to prevent nuisance issues. This does NOT mean that we should do nothing and let them have the run of our yards and neighborhoods. It also does NOT mean that every time a bear wanders through an area, it must be captured and relocated. Simply relocating an individual bear will not address the underlying issue of what attracted the bear to the area in the first place. Relocation does not change an individual bear’s behavior. The bear will continue the same behavior wherever it is. Attempting to capture and relocate a large, free-ranging, wild animal such as a bear is a complicated process, and has associated risks. This is only considered an option in very specific circumstances. In Rhode Island, there are no truly remote areas to place relocated bears, and surrounding states will not accept relocated bears.

Even if the “problem” bear is removed, another bear will be just as enticed by whatever attracted the first bear, unless the resource is removed. Working together as a community and “educating” bears that areas with people will not yield any rewards, and will just result in an unpleasant experience, is the most proactive option to avoid conflicts with bears. Therefore, removing attractants, using deterrents, and in some cases hazing bears are key. It is very possible to coexist with bears in a way that benefits both humans and wildlife!

If you or your pet(s) encounter an aggressive bear, contact the RIDEM Division of Law Enforcement immediately: 401-222-3070.

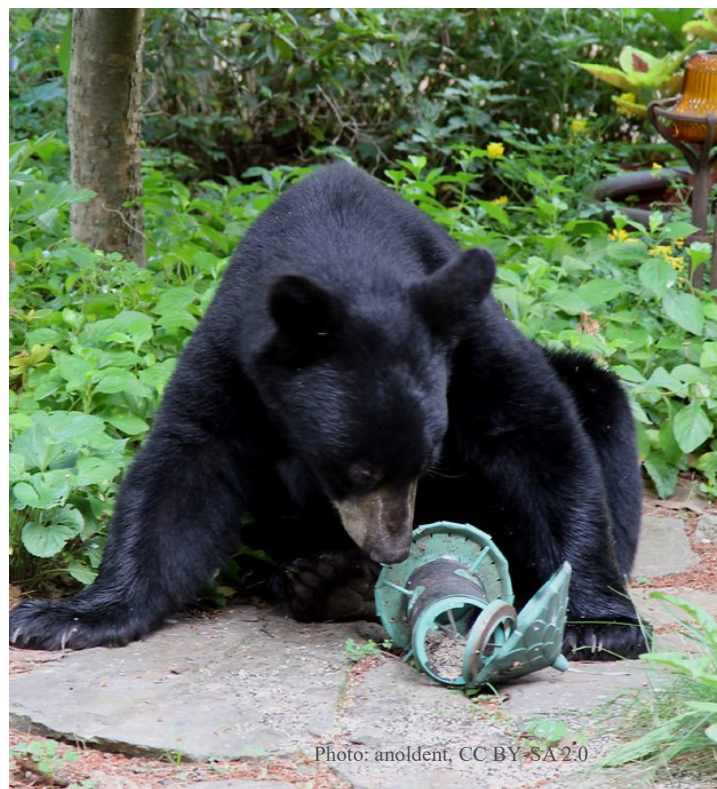


Photo: anoldent, CC BY-SA 2.0

Identifying & Removing Bear Attractants

Bears require a lot of calories, and much of their time revolves around finding food. With an excellent sense of smell, they are very good at doing so! Bears are omnivores and have a varied natural diet. These two characteristics combined often result in bears following their noses to dumpsters, backyard gardens, and bird feeders. This natural behavior leads to an unnatural situation that can result in bears becoming habituated to humans and associating us with a free buffet.

Below is a list of common bear attractants and tips on how to avoid issues. We encourage you to take a look at your own yard or community and “think like a bear.” If any of these attractants are present, it’s important to take early action and alter our living habits now before Rhode Island’s bear population increases or becomes accustomed to the presence of these tempting food sources. If bears are not encouraged to linger in backyards in the first place, they will be forced to move on and search for their natural food sources.

It is ILLEGAL to feed bears or other wildlife in Rhode Island, with the exception of raised backyard bird feeders. It leads to habituation and unnatural behavior that can endanger people and pets. Feeding wildlife human food can also negatively impact the animal’s health.

Attractant	Mitigation
Pet Food	Do not feed pets outside, store pet food inside.
Livestock/Feed	Store animal feed securely, inside or in a bear-proof container within buildings. Place coops, hutches, and pens away from the edge of the woods. Bring livestock (especially small animals like chickens and rabbits) inside at night. Consider installing electric fencing around chicken coops and rabbit hutches, or livestock paddocks.
Bird Feeder/Bird Seed	Take down bird feeders between March and November, when bears are most active. Clean up bird seed off ground. A bear’s diet is naturally low in fat, and high in carbohydrates. After hibernation, bears are highly attracted to fatty foods, such as seeds and suet. Your spring bird feeder may quickly turn into a bear feeder, particularly in the western half of RI. For residents in the Providence, Aquidneck Island, or East Bay areas, this is less likely to be an issue, but it is still a good rule of thumb to follow.
Garden	Most problems with bears include row crops like corn and pumpkins. Bears have sharp claws used for digging, and can be very determined, so most fencing will not deter them. Electric fencing can be installed if physical fencing is not effective.
Fruit Trees/Bushes	Bears naturally consume fruits in the wild, and will not know the difference between your apple tree or blueberry bushes and wild fruits. Cleaning up dropped fruits may help, but bears are good climbers, and will be able to access fruit still on the tree.
Compost	Secure compost piles in an enclosure. Do not compost meat, dairy or eggs, as these will create a smelly signpost for bears and other wildlife.
Garbage	Secure garbage in wildlife-proof containers. Examples of wildlife proof garbage cans can be found here . Only put out cans on the morning of garbage pickup day. Many animals, including bears, are active at night. Unsecured garbage cans are an open invitation to bears passing by. Dumpsters should be reinforced with locks.
Grills/Patios	Remove all food and clean grills, grilling equipment, and outdoor eating areas completely after use. Cooking grease is a tasty attractant for many wild animals, particularly bears. Store recycling in a secure container.
Beehives	Beehives are particularly vulnerable, because bears have a sweet tooth! Surround with secure fencing or electric fencing and set up away from the forest edge.

What should I do if I encounter a bear?

Text from Northeast Black Bear Technical Committee's Recommendations for Human-Black Bear Encounters

Black bears are large, strong wild animals that should be treated with respect. Seeing a black bear can be an exciting, and for some people, a nerve wracking event. Bears should always be appreciated from a distance to ensure the safety of humans and bears. These recommendations are meant to be general and cover the basic types of human-bear interactions that can occur. Encounters vary greatly, and all situations are different. Aggressive and predatory behaviors by bear are very rare, but possible, so it is wise to be aware of the bear's behavioral signals and appropriate actions to take. These recommendations are specific to North American black bears. If you live or recreate in an area where other bear species may be encountered, you should familiarize yourself with how to react in those situations, too.

In general, when you encounter a black bear you should:

- Remain calm. DON'T run from a bear.
- DON'T climb trees to escape a bear.
- Ensure the bear has an escape route.
- Back away when possible.
- If attacked, immediately fight back.
- DON'T feed bears.
- ***It is illegal to shoot or kill black bears in Rhode Island.***

If you encounter a bear while in a natural setting:	
Situation	Actions to Take
The bear is unaware of your presence	Quietly back away from the bear and leave the area. DO NOT approach the bear.
The bear is aware of your presence and is uninterested	Quietly back away from the bear and leave the area. DO NOT approach the bear.
The bear is curious (continues to look in your direction, smells the air, or slowly approaches)	Talk in a calm voice while slowly backing away from the bear. DO NOT approach the bear.
The bear is nervous or feels threatened by your presence (bear retreats up a tree, lowers its head with ears flattened, and sways back and forth, makes vocalizations which can include huffing and jaw popping and/or swats at the ground or tree)	These are common behaviors, and do not indicate the bear will attack. You have simply gotten too close. Begin repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice. Back away and leave the area.
The bear becomes aggressive (approaches you, begins to follow you, or charges.	Make yourself look bigger by putting your arms above your head. Continue to repeat "Hey bear" in a calm voice. Back away and leave the area while monitoring the bear. If it continues to follow you, stand your ground, make yourself look bigger, shout at the bear, threaten the bear with whatever is at hand (bang a stick on the ground, clap your hands), and prepare to use bear pepper spray if it is available. If the bear stops or turns around, back away and leave the area. If charged, stand your ground, talk to the bear in a calm voice and use bear pepper spray when available. If the bear makes contact with you, fight back using anything you have (e.g. stick, binoculars, swinging a backpack, kicking, etc.)!

If you encounter a bear while in a natural setting (<i>continued</i>):	
Situation	Actions to Take
The bear is stalking you and exhibiting predatory behavior (bear follows you as you move away, making little noise while following you, attempts to stay out of your sight, but continues to follow you, intently stares at you)	Follow guidelines for aggressive bear behavior on the previous page.
You encounter a bear in your backyard:	
Situation	Actions to Take
Encountering a bear in a backyard is a common occurrence in some areas because bears are often attracted to bird feeders, trash, pet food, etc.	Back away slowly while repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice. From a safe distance, make loud noises (for example shouting or banging pots and pans) to deter the bear from the area. Do not approach the bear. After the bear leaves, be sure to keep trash in a tight container or locked out building, bring in bird feeders and pet food and remove any other potential attractants.
You encounter a bear in a building, in a dumpster, around a corner, in your home, etc.:	
Situation	Actions to Take
The bear is exploring, eating, or engaging in destructive behavior. Bears have been known to break into homes, cars, and refrigerators to investigate an enticing smell or access food.	Back away slowly while repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice. Give the bear a clear escape route and do not corner it. If in your house or an outbuilding, do not lock the bear in a room. Instead, leave doors open as you exit the building. Do not approach the bear or try to force the bear out of a room. Contact 911 or RIDEM Environmental Police for assistance if necessary.
Your dog is attacked by a bear:	
Situation	Actions to Take
Bear comes into contact with your dog, bites or scratches dog	DO NOT rush to the bear and attempt to separate the bear and dog. Make loud noises such as shouting and clapping. If available, spray the bear with a hose or throw objects at the bear while remaining at a safe distance. Once the bear retreats, retrieve your dog, back away and leave the area. Contact your local veterinarian or health department to be advised on rabies protocol. Bear-dog conflicts can be reduced by checking your yard or porch for bears before letting your dog outside, especially at night, and keeping dogs leashed and supervised when walking in areas frequented by bears.

Avoiding Bear Encounters

While recreating outdoors, the following strategies can help to avoid bear encounters:

- Be aware of your surroundings
- Hike in a group
- Keep kids in sight
- Keep your dog on a leash
- Make noise when walking through thick cover (talk out loud, rustle branches, etc.)
- Do not let dogs chase bears or other wildlife
- Do not store food in your tent
- Cook away from your tent and clean cooking area thoroughly
- Don't sleep in the clothes you wore while cooking
- While camping, keep food, trash, and toiletries in your vehicle, suspended from a tree away from your tent, or in a bear-proof container



Photo: Brenda McCloskey

Curious bears, like this one spotted in Narragansett, are often just in search of food, but can be intimidating.

Following the guidelines in this document will help “educate” our state’s bears and maintain their sense of apprehension around humans, thus reducing the frequency of these occurrences.



Photo: Ray Jobin



Photo: J. Mackenzie

Research & Monitoring in Rhode Island

Bear Hair Stations

In Rhode Island, we are mostly seeing individual transient bears traveling from Massachusetts and Connecticut. We estimate that there are currently only a few resident bears present in our state, however, we predict that number will increase over time. While bear sightings have increased throughout the state, it's unclear if people are spotting the same bear as it works its way across the state's landscape, or completely different individuals.

To gather more information about Rhode Island's bear population, the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife funded a project through the federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program in collaboration with the University of Rhode Island's Wildlife Genetics and Ecology Lab (WGEL). The Division worked with volunteers to set up and check 42 bear hair stations throughout the state. This 5 year study was completed with the intent of collecting baseline data on the current status of bears across western Rhode Island.



Gray foxes were frequent, curious visitors to the hair snare stations, along with other mammals.



A bear caught on one of the many trail cameras deployed throughout the state

Stations were composed of a scent lure surrounded by a low fence of barbed wire that bears can easily step over. The scent lures used are formulated for research purposes, and come in a variety of flavors that would be enticing to bears. Some examples of scents used include blueberry, anise, fish, and jelly donut! It is important to note that the stations were not baited with anything edible, as this would habituate them to being fed. Trail cameras were set up at each station to capture photos of the many wild visitors at the stations. This is a commonly used method to determine bear presence or absence, and to collect DNA samples.

As bears approached the station to investigate the interesting smell, they had to step over or crawl under the barbed wire and snag a bit of fur on the barbs. Many dedicated volunteers attended these hair stations once a week throughout the active bear season to check for hair samples. Any hair found was transported to the WGEL for genetic analysis with the goal of identifying individual bears and having a clearer picture of Rhode Island's bear population.

During the 5 year survey period, volunteers and staff collected hair samples from many different species of wildlife, but no bear hair samples were collected. However, photos were captured on the trail cameras, still indicating bear presence in western Rhode Island. Bears, though large animals, are like most mammals in that they are difficult to study remotely! However, negative data is still significant, indicating a starting point for biologists to reference as our bear population increases in the state. The intent is to continue this study at various time intervals to track changes in our bear population over time.



Volunteers and seasonal staff searched for hair samples throughout the duration of this 5 year baseline study.

Plan Ahead

Black bears are steadily returning to Rhode Island's landscape, and will most likely become more and more commonly seen in our yards and communities. We have a unique opportunity in the state to avoid problems with bears before they become established. By teaching bears that backyards are not their personal grocery stores and humans are not vending machines, handing out snacks, we can keep wildlife wild and our communities safe. As illustrated in this guide, coexistence is perfectly possible, but depends on our efforts to think ahead and remove attractants prior to encountering a bear or having property destroyed by them. Remember, bears are usually only following their noses to what they perceive as a food source, with no intention of coming into contact with people. Please help share this knowledge and make sure all Rhode Islanders are "bear aware!"

For More Information...

RIDEM DIVISION OF FISH & WILDLIFE (DFW)

The DFW can provide technical advice and information, and can assist landowners with guidance on identifying bear-related damage and measures to prevent bear-related problems on their properties. RIDEM does not provide remuneration for property damage caused by bears. For assistance, contact:

DFW Great Swamp Field Office
277 Great Neck Road, West Kingston, RI 02892
Phone: (401) 789-0281.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bear Wise: This very informative online platform was developed by black bear biologists and the Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to provide free resources for individuals and communities regarding black bear biology, coexistence strategies, and solutions to issues with bears. Visit www.bearwise.org for more information.

WildlifeHelp.org: This online resource offers an easy-to-navigate database with guidance on how to solve issues with bears and other wildlife. Visit www.wildlifehelp.org for more information.

RIDEM Black Bear Fact Sheet: This one page fact sheet quickly summarizes the information in this document. Click [here](#) to read and download the fact sheet.

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