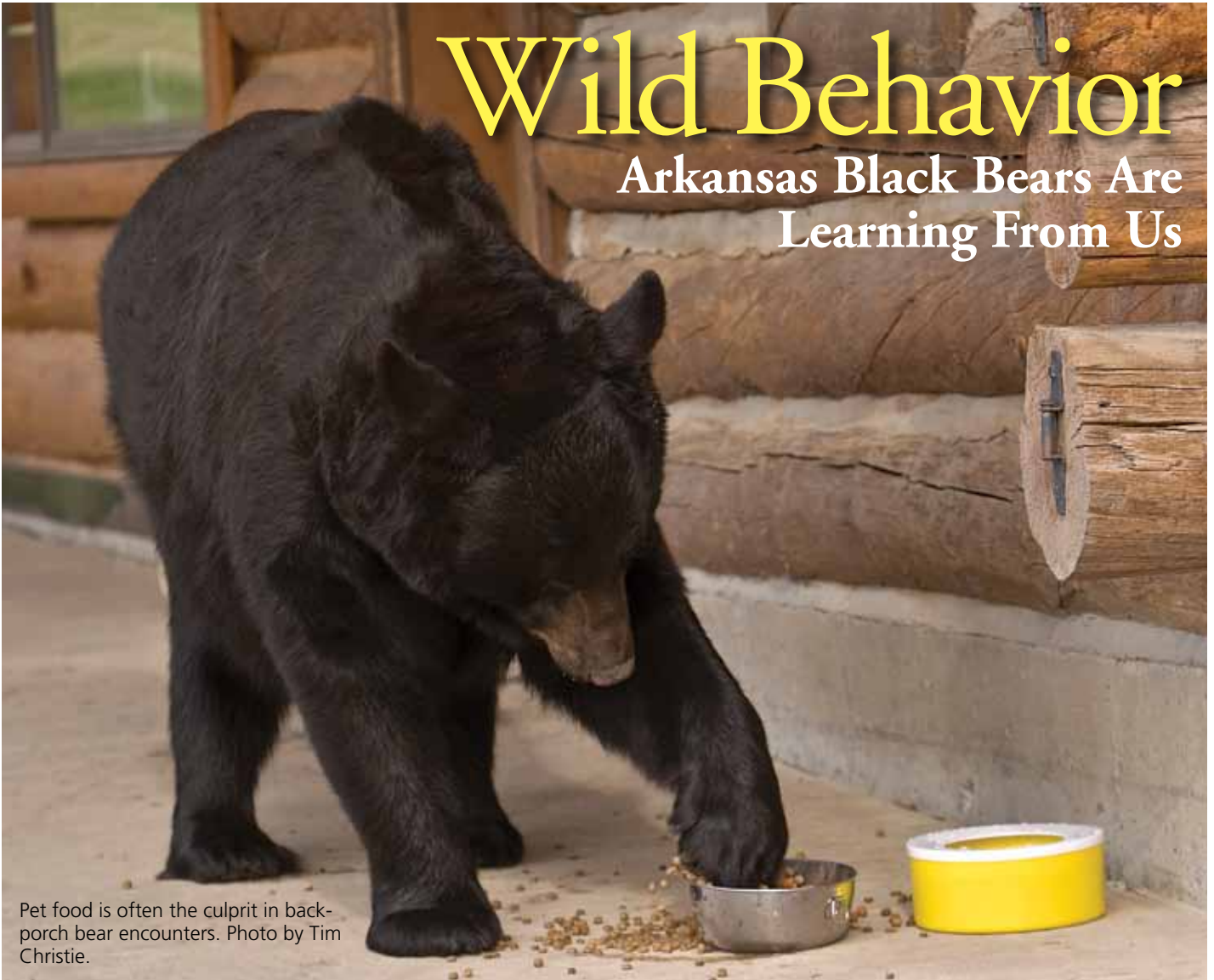


Wild Behavior

Arkansas Black Bears Are Learning From Us



Pet food is often the culprit in back-porch bear encounters. Photo by Tim Christie.

BY RANDY ZELLERS

Arkansas's black bear restoration is considered by many biologists to be the most successful among large predators. Bear hunting has come from a novelty to a legitimate season in a very short time, and bear sightings are plentiful in the Ozarks, Ouachitas and even the southeastern part of the state in The Big Woods, bordering the White River.

At the same time the bear population expanded, more people moved into bear territory to get back to nature and enjoy the wild side of Arkansas. It was only a matter of time before the two crossed paths.

Natural Nuisances

"Ten to 15 years ago, most nuisances we saw were a product of the population expanding," said AGFC Bear Program Coordinator Myron Means.

The typical nuisance call used to be a matter of the bear's life cycle. After bear cubs are born, they spend summer and fall with their mother. They will go into a second den cycle with her as yearlings.

But when the next spring arrives, it's time for the cubs to find their own way.

"Prior to the breeding season, the mother will drive all her young male cubs out of her territory and give up a portion of her home range to her female cubs," Means said. "This does

two things – it prevents inbreeding and it helps prolong her lineage as she knows that her territory is a good place for her female offspring to be a bear.”

Means says young males become nomads and must find areas that have ample food and no competition from other bears. Often, those elements are found where people have settled.

“The young males are kind of like teenagers that are left on their own,” Means said. “They really don’t know any better than to raid a bird feeder or beehive in someone’s backyard because they haven’t had any experience with people.”

Hunger Pangs

The last few years haven’t followed the typical scenario. Many adult bears are beginning to show up on nuisance calls.

“In the last five years, we’ve had a shift to older bears,” Means said. “That indicates problems related to food. It could also indicate that the bear population’s growth has slowed.”

Kevin Lynch, an AGFC biologist in Fort Smith who spends a lot of his summer tending to nuisance bear calls, agrees that food has been the primary factor in many of the bear calls he’s received in the last five years.

“Bears try to avoid people, but if there’s no food to eat, hunger will take over, and we’ll find them in people’s bird feeders and garbage cans,” Lynch said.

Lynch and Clarence Rodrigues, an AGFC wildlife technician, stayed busy last summer trapping bears that were searching for food.

“A lot of this year’s complaints in the Ouachitas can be linked back to a weak wild blueberry crop,” Lynch said. “Then we had quite a few hot, dry days that caused the wild blackberry crop to fail in the Ozarks and the Ouachitas. Bears had to venture out to find new food.”

Unfortunately, the food bears find often is in someone’s backyard.

“We’ve had a lot of trouble this year with bears in people’s fruit trees,” Lynch said. “There are a lot of old home sites that have old, standing pear trees, and this year saw a large pear crop. That really brought out the bears. Usually, you can remove the food source and the bears will leave, but you can’t just remove your fruit trees.”

No Free Lunch

“Everyone who lives in bear country should be ‘bear aware,’ ” Means said. “You should almost expect bears to show up when the weather impacts the soft-mast crop. It all goes back to paying attention to what possible food sources you’re putting out that will attract bears.”

According to Means, landowners can do a few things to prevent wandering bears from turning backyards into buffets.

1. Don’t feed wildlife during summer – even birdfeeders aren’t a great idea in summer. The animals have plenty of food in the woods and most migrating birds already have left the state.
2. Feed dogs and other outside pets only the amount of food they can eat in one sitting. Don’t leave food out overnight.
3. Don’t use automatic pet feeders.
4. Store livestock feed and pet food in secure containers inside a locked building.
5. If you burn trash in barrels, make sure all trash is burned or removed.

Chunk Rock

Means also warns that just because you see a bear, it doesn’t mean it lives in your backyard and you have a “bear problem.”

“I get a lot of calls from people who saw a bear and are afraid to let their children stand outside to wait on the bus,” Means said. “But 99 percent of the time, people have absolutely nothing to fear from a bear.

“Holler, clap, wave your arms and throw a rock or two at the bear to let it know you are there and that it’s not welcome. Even if the bear doesn’t run off in a bolt of lightning like a deer would, it doesn’t



Seeing a bear in the woods is exciting, but one at the window is another matter. Photo by Don Owens.

mean it didn't get the message to move on."

Means says females with cubs always bring worries about aggressive behavior, but the mothering instinct of sows is overstated.

"Don't be afraid that a sow with cubs is going to rip your door down and come after you if you holler and throw a rock at them. We tend to give bears this human quality of vengeance. If you throw a rock at a person, they may chase you down for a little payback. If you throw a rock at a bear, it just knows that it hurts and it's time to move on."



When nuisance bears are captured, they are given lip tattoos and red ear tags for later identification. Photo by Randy Zellers.



Wildlife biologists dealing with bears must be prepared to use tranquilizers on bears that find their way into dangerous situations. Photo by Randy Zellers.

Relocation Program

When nuisance bears won't leave or if they are in potentially dangerous situations, AGFC biologists must step in and motivate them to find new homes.

"Obviously, every situation is different," Lynch said. "If a bear has climbed up a telephone pole in downtown Mena, we have to move right away and we may have to use a tranquilizer without trapping the bear first, but in most situations, we prefer using a culvert trap."

Lynch says biologists try to avoid snares or other types of traps for nuisance bears because they may hurt or kill pets or livestock by accident. If a dog ends up in a culvert trap, it can be released with only a few rattled nerves.

The typical culvert trap is like a Havahart live trap on steroids. It doesn't hurt bears

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— Myron Means,
AGFC Bear Program Coordinator

and is mounted on a small trailer, which makes transporting a bear much easier than lifting 200-300 pounds of dead weight.

"We'll bait the trap up with sardines or other tasty bear treats," Means said. "When the bear gets in, the heavy steel mesh gate slams shut."

Fear Factor

"We can't really take the bear we trap too far from where it was captured," Means said. "Not only does it take too much time, we know from research that bears have an incredible homing instinct. It wouldn't matter if we took a bear 50 miles away and released it, it would be back in its home range fairly quickly."

Instead, AGFC biologists and technicians try to re-instill fear of humans in nuisance bears.

"We provide a level of adverse conditioning while the bear is at the nuisance area," Means said. "We tranquilize it, give it a lip tattoo and red ear tags for later recognition, and pull a tooth for aging and health data. Then we'll take the bear to the nearest remote location, which may only be a few miles down the road. When it is fully awake, we open the culvert trap and pepper the bear with some rubber buckshot."

Means said bears are pretty quick learners and very few nuisance bears return for a second or third offense. In those rare cases, more drastic steps have to be taken. Occasionally, a bear simply can't be reconditioned and it will be killed.

"We only do that as a last resort," Lynch said. "No one wants to see the bear be put down like that, but if it does pose a real threat to people, you have to do it." **AW**



Wildlife feeders have increased the amount of nuisance bear complaints in the last five years. Photo by Michael Dougherty.

Don't Feed the ~~Bears~~ Animals

“I’ve got 15 bears coming to my feeder – take a look at the pictures.”

That’s the last thing AGFC Bear Program Coordinator Myron Means wants to hear.

“I get tons of calls from people wanting to show me photos of bears under their wildlife feeder,” Means said. “I’m extremely happy that people are excited about the bears, and I’m happy to answer their questions. The feeder is just something I can’t be happy about.”

They used to be a deer hunter’s tool to increase success, but feeders have become popular with wildlife watchers in the last few years. People who think they’re helping wildlife with corn feeders may be surprised to learn that they may be causing more harm than good.

Pest Producers

Another factor, which isn’t related to bears, is the amount of nest predators and nuisance animals that benefit from wildlife feeders.

“Anyone who has a game camera pointed at their feeder can tell you how many rats, raccoons and feral hogs they see eating the corn,” said Kevin Lynch, an AGFC biologist based in Fort Smith. “Sure, deer and other preferred wildlife will get some benefit from the feeder, but the damage from increased nest predators and increased disease because of high animal densities isn’t worth it.”

Empty Calories

Means says that with the exception of winter and lean-mast years, corn is not as beneficial to

wildlife as natural foods.

“I don’t know of any natural food that’s a lower nutritional value than corn, especially during the summer. People misinterpret that the wildlife is coming to the feeder, so it must be better.”

Bears and other wildlife have evolved to conserve energy when they can. If they can go to a feeder and load up on calories, they will. But wildlife also needs protein and many nutrients corn doesn’t provide.

Conditioning Catastrophe

If disease, nest predators and increased competition between wildlife weren’t enough, wildlife watchers who live in bear country should consider how putting a year-round attractant for bears is going to play out. Watching a bear visit your feeder once or twice would be a great thrill, but the bear isn’t going to nibble a little and move on. Would a person leave an all-you-can-eat buffet to scrounge out a few berries?

“I really fear that we’re teaching our bears to be nuisance bears,” Means said. “If a cub spends all summer at a corn feeder, it’s going to become habituated to that being its food source. When people stop feeding them or move, the bears will be so tuned in to eating under feeders there will be no rehabilitating them and we’ll have to destroy many more bears than we do now.”

– Randy Zellers