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Eye on the Environment

We all love bear stories; get them at the Bear Fair

By Anne Dahl

Everyone loves bear stories. Problem is: I haven't got a story this year. Bears have avoided me for so long I can't remember when I last saw one, which is a good sign.

When bears avoid people, it usually means plenty of natural foods are available. This season, most of our bears are staying out of sight and out of trouble, with a few notable exceptions.

In May, several people saw a female black bear with twin cubs. The bears were not bothering people. They seemed to be acting naturally, except they were allowing themselves to be seen. The technical term for this behavior is "habituated," which means the mother and her offspring are accustomed to being around people. Habituated bears are entertaining for humans, but they are putting themselves at risk.

When natural forage becomes scarce, habituated bears are most likely to become "food conditioned," which is the term for hungry bears that lack fear of humans and find free handouts provided by careless people. Once a bear is food conditioned, its survival is in question. Food conditioned bears are dangerous. They become "management" bears, which means they may have to be moved or killed to protect people.

The green-up this spring has provided the natural foods bears need after leaving their dens. Furthermore, the future looks bright. The huckleberries are beginning to ripen at lower elevations. The bushes are loaded with green berries. This bodes well for the bruins, which rely on natural fruits to fatten before they den. With a good berry crop, most bears avoid problems with people.

Kathy Koors reported encountering a blond grizzly bear on June 30 as she was walking her dogs after work near the Swan River. The bear was headed south on the trail while Kathy was headed north. The dogs gave Kathy a "we're out of here" look, as they raced past her towards home. The bear turned and ran in the other direction, and Kathy retreated, following the dogs.

"I was in a place I call the Bear Hole. I probably shouldn't have been there this time of year," Kathy said. "It's where I often see bear sign." Until the snow gives way at higher elevations, bears need the lush riparian vegetation that grows along our streams for their food and hiding cover.

Kathy's encounter was a typical experience for people who spend a lot of time outdoors in the Swan Valley. The bear, dogs and Kathy behaved as they should, once the event was underway. And, although Kathy says she'll avoid the Bear Hole for the time being, she has a bear story to share.

This season, people in the Swan Valley have more resources than ever before to help them avoid unfortunate encounters with bears and other wildlife.

The second annual Bear Fair on August 1 at the Hungry Bear Steakhouse is a fun time to

for families and friends to learn about bear research, bear management, and living successfully with bears in the Swan Valley. Tim Manley, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Chuck Jonkel, Great Bear Foundation; and Jeff Stetz, Northern Divide Grizzly Bear Project will speak.

The Wind River Bear Institute and their Karelian bear dogs will give a demonstration on living safely with bears. The Bear Fair will also include a bear pepper spray demonstration, a Bear Aware Trail for kids to learn safe camping and hiking techniques and discover bear sign, a kids' activity table, and several information booths.

A raffle will feature a flight with Bear Ranger Mark Ruby; a day in the field with Tim Manley; a weekend tracking class from Northwest Connections; a bear resistant garbage container; a hand-made bear quilt; four Griz tickets on the 45 yard line, and other gifts.

The Swan Valley Bear Resources group, formed this year, is available to help residents avoid problems with wildlife by making property safe, including conducting property assessments, securing bear attractants, setting up electric fencing, and other assistance.

Bear Resources is comprised of local volunteers organized by Swan Ecosystem Center and Northwest Connections. Occasionally financial assistance may be available for technological solutions such as electric fencing, which can be expensive.

On a low note this spring, a grizzly killed three sheep at a farm in the Swan Valley. One of the first tasks the Bear Resources group tackled was the construction of electric fencing to protect the remaining flock from further bear depredation.

Electronic fencing, if properly erected, is effective for protecting livestock, fruit trees, compost piles and other attractants that are hard to contain. Tom Parker, Northwest

Connections, is enthusiastic about the potential of electric fencing for training bears to avoid property. Bears are smart, he says. It doesn't take them long to decide a few chickens or sheep aren't worth a painful zap. Bear fencing packs a powerful punch. Most bears will learn to avoid protected property all together after a few experiences.

State and federal wildlife managers have been experimenting successfully with electric fencing to prevent bears from snitching game carcasses, stock feed, and honey from bee hives. The fencing usually consists of several electric strands powered by a solar panel. Motion-sensitive cameras set up at fencing sites have captured short videos of bears skidaddling after their first jolt and showing no signs of returning.

The new electrified sheep corral in the Swan Valley has given the Bear Resources group and a willing landowner an opportunity to work out the details of an effective fencing design that will keep sheep in and bears out.

We are lucky in the Swan Valley to have so many resources to help people and wildlife coexist and keep our bear stories on a positive note.