

Bears awake early, local organization looks to head off conflicts



A black bear contemplates eating a berry at the National Bison Range in this file photo. (Jeremy Weber photo)

By

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With bears reportedly coming out of hibernation around the state — nearly a month early — People and Carnivores Northwest Field Project Manager Ryan Wilbur made a presentation to Columbia Falls Chamber of Commerce members during their March luncheon on Tuesday, March 12.

People and Carnivores is a Montana nonprofit dedicated to educating and coordinating resources for human-predator coexistence. Their work is primarily between the Greater Yellowstone, Northern Continental Divide and Bitterroot ecosystems, prime habitat for bears.

Wilbur showed a map displaying the ecosystems' expansion, stretching in a way that would eventually promote connectivity.

“There’s been a little bit of research that’s shown in the Columbia Falls area, there are a lot of potential good corridors to connect these ecosystems. Because the habitat’s really good, bears are going to continue to use that corridor regardless of how many get taken down or trapped or

relocated. Trying to address the attractant is way easier than dealing with the bear,” Wilbur said.

The majority of Columbia Falls’s conflicts have historically been garbage-related. In 2022, after a bad growing season for natural food sources, grizzly and black bears alike were spotted in town looking for food, prompting city council to pass an emergency ordinance requiring residents to secure garbage and other attractants. Columbia Falls also spent \$9,000 on bear-resistant containers for the city. The summer of 2023, a “bear law” was passed requiring Columbia Falls residents to secure attractants including domestic animal food, garbage, recycling and small livestock and to remove ripe fruit and food sources deliberately left out for wild animals.

“It is unlawful for a resident, association of residents, or a business to act or fail to act in such a way that results in the accumulation of uncollected refuse, garbage, or rubbish in or on areas of their owned or leased property such that it is readily accessible to undomesticated large predator animals, including but not limited to black bears or grizzly bears,” the law reads.

People and Carnivores helps provide tools, such as cost-shares for bear-proof garbage, recycling and compost containers and electric fencing around livestock for both businesses and individuals. They also offer education on bear safety and conflict prevention that can be used as part of employee training, for vacation rental owners to distribute to tourists, or for homeowners. Their toolkits, which include checklists, resources and reminders — such as a magnet for the fridge reminding users to secure food or a sticker reminder to lock up garbage cans — are available digitally at

<https://peopleandcarnivores.org/education-materials>

or by contacting the organization for a hard copy. These materials are available for free or a cost-share dependent on user.

Upcoming, People and Carnivores hopes to release a Restaurant Bear Safety toolkit based off of education programs available in Canada. The kit will serve as training for kitchen staff and provide a closing checklist.

The goal is to make bear-safe living the cultural norm.

As the weather warms up, Wilbur reminded the audience that spring and fall are typically the most conflict-heavy seasons. Peak bear activity is typically in the cooler hours; morning, evening and night. Recreationalists should look out for “bear beds” in the heat of day, shady spots and bushes where bears may seek refuge and easily be spooked. Be aware of surroundings, look for scat, carry and know how to use repellants.

Securing attractants is a big push for all categories — recreation through agriculture. Bears’ sense of smell is seven times better than a dog’s, and Wilbur noted that some attractants people don’t typically think of include naturally smelly things; gardens, white bark pine. But bears are also known to get into antifreeze and have been reported to eat hot tub covers despite the fact that they have no nutritional value. A list of proven bear-resistant products, tested by the naughty or orphaned bears at West Yellowstone’s Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in partnership with the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, is available at

<https://igbconline.org/programs/bear-resistant-products//>

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“Bears could potentially be anywhere, they’re very adaptable, they’re very generalistic. So the potential for an encounter may be increasing, but if there are steps that we take to reduce that kind of attractant, that can prevent them from even wanting to come into your business, your home, anything like that,” Wilbur said.

People and Carnivores plans to attend Columbia Falls Community Market this summer, and can be found anytime through

<https://peopleandcarnivores.org/>

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