

Becoming 'bear smart': Bozeman explores how to prevent conflict in bear country

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A bear rests in a tree near 11th Avenue in Bozeman from 2019.
Courtesy of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Bozeman has a bear problem.

Sometimes they are caught on doorbell cameras, clumsily scaling decks or swatting at bird feeders.

Other times, they leave behind tipped over trash cans, torn up garbage bags or distinctive piles of berry-dotted bear scat.

One bear famously got into Bozeman High School in the middle of town a few years ago, and a video of the beast ambling past red lockers and classrooms went viral.

It isn't really a new problem though. Bears have passed through the land that was and is Bozeman forever, following drainages down from the mountains in search of food.



A bear rests in a tree near 11th Avenue in Bozeman in 2019.
Courtesy of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

As the city has grown in population and reach, the number of human-bear conflicts in residential areas hasn't dramatically spiked.

But in recent years, the attention paid to black bears in town has increased, as has concern for what is being done about reducing attractants for bears and keeping them away from euthanization.

In the last two years, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has euthanized 10 black bears in the Bozeman area. There has also been about 170 bear-human conflicts in the area stretching from Bridger Canyon to Gallatin Gateway in that time.

Reports of bears being killed in the area last summer and a picture of two bear carcasses thrown into a landfill struck the hearts of some local residents, who are now working to push the city to do more to prevent conflicts.

"It just feels like Bozeman has kind of dropped the ball compared to other communities as far as dealing with this issue," area resident Dorothy Filson said.

Co-existence in bear country

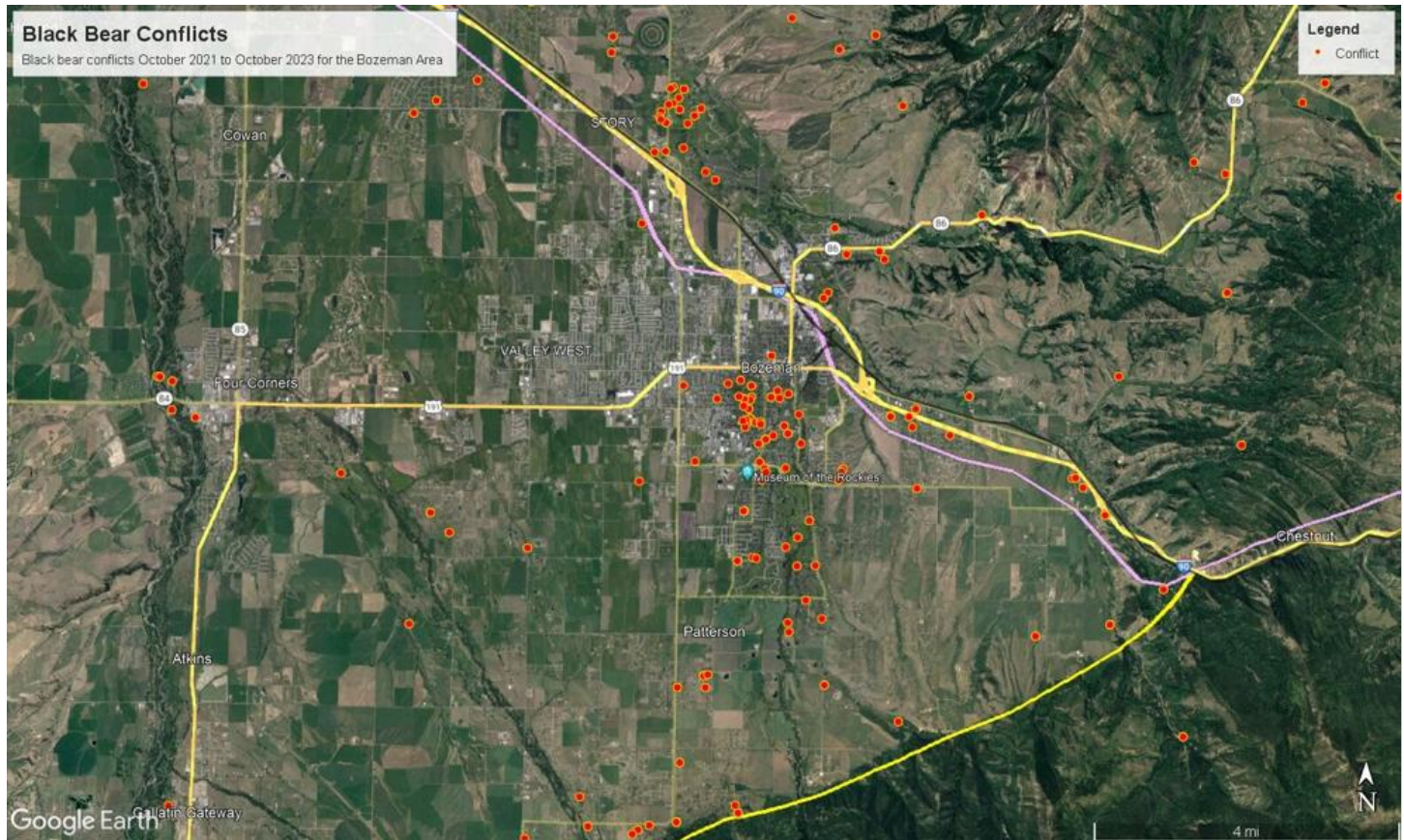
A map from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks shows a smattering of black bear conflicts between October 2021 and the same month in 2023.

Red dots light up around creek corridors, near major roadways like Interstate 90 and in the middle of Bozeman.

“Since Bozeman has been a town, black bears have been moving through that entire time,” said Jeremiah Smith, a grizzly bear management specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. “Most of the creeks that come through Bozeman – Sourdough, Bozeman Creek – those all have a ton of natural food sources that are available on a seasonal basis ... it’s nothing new.”

How many bears show up in town and when can depend on the year, said Blakeley Adkins, a wildlife conservation associate with the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. More natural food sources in their typical habitats can mean bears stay out of urban areas, Adkins said.

But as Bozeman's population has grown and more people are living in areas on the fringe of town, more bear conflicts are bound to be reported.



A map showing the locations of black bear conflicts in the Bozeman area between October 2021 and October 2023.
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

“The city of Bozeman has grown exponentially over the last 10 years and so we’ve got a lot more people, a lot more ground that has houses on it ... and the majority of that ground is outside of the original plot of the city of Bozeman,” Smith said. “As the city of Bozeman has grown, a lot of the habitat has been chewed up, so to speak.”

Smith said while it may feel like there are more bear sightings, the number of bear conflicts have stayed in the average range in recent years.

Though there are concerns that impacts from climate change will reduce bears’ natural food sources and push them into town earlier and hungrier, Smith said FWP hasn’t seen that happen yet.

The increased attention to the issue might just be a sign of the times, Adkins said. Bears are often active during the night, when most people are unlikely to see them. But the advent of doorbell cameras means bears may be caught on film more often, which people then share on social media.

“It may seem like there are more bears moving through but it's probably always been that way,” Adkins said.

To advocates on this issue, whether there are more bears or not in town doesn't really matter.

“There's all kinds of reasons for why ... but it seems like the problem definitely is not getting any better,” said Clint Nagel, with the Gallatin Wildlife Association. “We need to put a stop to this. No one wants to see black bears euthanized just because of people disregarding the proper behavior at home.”

How to avoid conflicts

When a bear conflict is reported, FWP will talk to the reporting party and try to get more information. Most of the time, Smith said, there is an unsecured attractant like garbage cans, outdoor pet food, barbecue grills, bird feeders or fruit trees that is bringing a bear into the yard.

Sometimes, the bear is just moving through town and doesn't linger. Bears that are just eating fruit or other natural food sources sometimes “get a ride” from FWP, Smith said, meaning relocated.

But sometimes, bears that become habituated to unnatural food sources like garbage cans can start defending those food sources.

“We have some options, but at the end of the day, bears that have gotten into unsecured garbage multiple times can be dangerous to people,” Smith said.

FWP's main priority when it comes to managing conflicts is human safety, Smith said.

Black bears are the main issue for conflicts in residential areas in Bozeman, but grizzlies aren't too far away — FWP euthanized a garbage-habituated grizzly in Big Sky last year. Several advocates said that securing attractants from black bears will have the bonus effect of not enticing the bigger threat into town.

“We're not looking to make Bozeman, Montana, a place for grizzlies to hang out in,” Smith said.

The solutions to limiting conflict are fairly straightforward. Keeping garbage cans inside until pick-up, using bear-resistant garbage totes, clearing away fruit from garden plants and putting away bird feeders between March 1 and Dec. 1 are simple steps people can take.

But educating people about what they can do to help is more difficult. Several people pointed to the nature of Bozeman's growing and shifting population as a hurdle.

Those who are new to town and bear country in general may not know the basics of bear safety and those visiting may be even more unaware.

“It's tricky. There's a lot of second home owners, there's a lot of vacation home owners and Bozeman has seen a lot of people coming and going,” Adkins said. “So it might not be common knowledge for people to even know there are bears in Bozeman.”

The city of Bozeman's main focus when it comes to reducing bear conflicts is through public awareness campaigns and its solid waste division. The city has made about 100 bear resistant garbage totes available to city trash customers, and plans to acquire more with federal funds from an EPA grant.



Bozeman police and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks remove a sleepy bear from a home on Thursday morning.
Photo courtesy of the Bozeman Police Department

Private trash haulers also offer bear resistant totes.

Nicholas Ross, the city's transportation and engineering director, said they have tracked conflicts and identified two "bear zones" in northeast Bozeman around Bridger Creek and in the southern part of the city where they adjust trash pick-up times so residents can put their totes out in the morning and not feel they have to do so the night before.

"What we consider our bear zones right now might just be our bear zones because they're the easiest points to get to, not necessarily because that's the furthest the bears will go," Ross said. "In the future ... there could be some additional steps that could be taken throughout the community. We certainly don't want to push bears even further into the core of our community."

Learning to be 'bear smart'

Getting as many people on board with reducing attractants is crucial to keep bears away, said Rosie Costain, a communications coordinator with People and Carnivores, a nonprofit based in Bozeman.

"It's great when one person does it, but you also need someone's neighbors to do it too," Costain said. "Because a bear is going to wander into one yard and say there's nothing here for me, and go into the next yard."

A community-wide approach is the basis for a "bear smart" framework, which Costain said involves looking at an entire town and figuring out what work needs to be done to prevent bear conflicts, rather than just working with individual property owners.

Several advocates have pointed to Missoula and "bear smart" communities as an example that Bozeman should follow.

Missoula, after years of ramping up work on the issue, last year passed expanded regulations around bear resistant garbage cans.

Ginny Merriam, spokesperson for the city of Missoula, said it was about 20 years ago that advocates started talking to residents in the Rattlesnake neighborhood — a hotspot for bears — about securing their garbage.

Then in 2006, the city passed a ban on feeding wildlife, and a few years later, the city established bear buffer zones and set regulations around garbage pick-up, requiring residents in those areas to only put their cans out during the day of pick-up.

But in 2022, an influx of bears in town brought an increased number of conflicts. A working group put together a hazard assessment, Merriam said, which showed about half of all bear conflicts were a result of unsecured garbage.

The Missoula City-County Health Department took up the issue, resulting in the city and county voting to expand the area's bear buffer zones and require the use of bear-resistant garbage cans in those areas.

Missoula's regulations require private trash carriers — the city doesn't have trash services — to provide the bear resistant totes, which can cost more than regular cans.

The new regulations were a long time coming, Merriam said.

"I think that it requires a cultural change in the way that we look at wildlife, and sometimes it takes us a really long time," Merriam said.

Bozeman isn't yet seriously considering following suit on implementing any specific regulations, Ross said, instead focusing more on exploring the issue and promoting voluntary compliance with bear-safe practices.

Solutions that work in Missoula may not work in Bozeman, Costain said.

"Bozeman can look at that for inspiration, but we definitely have to look at the main attractants here and why are bears doing what they're doing in this area," Costain said. "Each community is unique."

Ross said one concern in Bozeman is that the city's trash-pick up services would compete with the private companies, and any requirements to use bear-resistant totes could result in less bear-safe practices or push more customers to private haulers.

Mayor Terry Cunningham said any decision on solid waste regulations to prevent bear conflicts would have to be data driven.

"If we are seeing evidence where the bear-trash conflict areas are expanding beyond the creek corridors, then that is something that we ... would likely consider," Cunningham said. "The goal is to make sure that when we make decisions like that it's driven by actual data we see on the ground."

One example Bozeman is picking up on from Missoula is the importance for city-county collaboration on the issue. Ross said they are focusing on conflicts around the periphery of the city, where county land is only a stone's throw away and indistinguishable to a bear.

“Similar to Missoula, we would really see this as a greater conversation and collaboration in order to effectively reduce those conflicts across the valley,” Ross said.

Nancy Ostlie, another concerned resident who is also advocating for the issue, said they are not looking to prescribe a specific solution, but that she is hoping for more urgency on this front.

“I feel like just getting the data on their deaths and conflicts, and knowing that a fed bear is a dead bear...we should not spend 20 years getting to the point where Missoula is at,” Ostlie said.

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