

Nuisance Bear Deaths Decline as Bear-Proof Cans and

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Florida wildlife officials are on pace this year to put down fewer than 20 black bears that pose a risk to public safety - the smallest number in five years - a sign that bear-resistant garbage cans and "bear-wise" rules may be reducing conflicts between people and the state's largest native land mammal.

Last year, 57 bears deemed safety risks by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission were euthanized, including eight in Lake, Orange and Seminole counties. So far, the FWC has killed just seven this year, including a 550-pounder that tried to break into a Lake County home in April and a Longwood bear suspected of killing two dogs in May.

In 2015, the year of Florida's first bear hunt in two decades, the FWC put down 106 conflict bears. The hunt claimed 304 before it was abruptly halted after two days.

"I think we are heading in the right direction," said Mike Orlando, assistant coordinator of the FWC's bear management program, who is hopeful this year's good start will continue for the sake of people and bears. "In some stage of becoming a 'bear-wise' community, there's 23 communities around the state now."

Wingfield North, the gated Longwood community where the state's worst mauling occurred in December 2013, became the first in Florida to impose rules requiring residents to use bear-resistant trash cans to lock up their garbage and to eliminate other attractants that could lure a bear into the neighborhood from the woodlands next door.

"Our bear-wise policy has been working very well," said Gary Kaleita, a lawyer and Wingfield North resident who helped draft the rules adopted in June 2014.

The community tracks bear sightings, which are reported to gate attendants and posted on the community's Facebook page.

"There are a few anomalies, but we have been successful in limiting incursions, and when bears do enter the subdivision they usually just pass through to nearby subdivisions that are not bear-wise, since they don't find food in ours," he said.

Bears had frequently invaded Wingfield's trash cans, garages and pools - at least two dozen times in 2014 alone.

But that's happened just twice in the last 12 months, said Kaleita, who works for Lowndes, Drosdick, Doster, Kantor & Reed in Orlando.

Sarah Barrett, who crunches bear data for the wildlife agency, cautioned against viewing this year's relatively low number of euthanized conflict bears year too optimistically - or giving too much credit to the increasing numbers of locktop trash

receptacles used in Seminole County's Wekiva River Protection Area and other wildlife corridors where bears hang out.

"It's unlikely it's just one or two things," she said. "There are many factors that can affect human-bear conflicts to varying degrees in any given year."

For instance, Barrett pointed out, the region's longer, colder winter may have kept some bears in dens longer.

Less-active bears generally means fewer residential sightings, fewer sightings mean fewer calls to the state's nuisance-bear hotline and fewer calls usually mean fewer kills.

The nuisance bear hotline handled 6,226 calls in 2017, about 500 fewer than in 2013, when complaints peaked at 6,734.

Also, the two months when bears are on their worst behavior are yet to come - October and November.

The FWC killed 20 bears in those months last year.

Bears are hyperactive in late fall as they gorge themselves in preparation for a winter denning period, commonly considered hibernation.

Their hunt for food often takes them from the forest to nearby neighborhoods in search of garbage-day buffets.

The FWC adopted clearer guidelines for handling conflict bears in November 2016, outlining when to put an animal down and under what circumstances it can be relocated. (The rules can be viewed at the bottom of this article.)

The agency put down 36 conflict bears and relocated 50 nuisance bears in 2016. It released or relocated 87 bears in 2017.

While bear-wise rules could have some effect on this year's number of euthanized bears, Wingfield is the only community with 100 percent compliance in Central Florida.

Barrett also cited "caller suppression" as a possible factor in Lake, Orange and Seminole counties.

Some Central Florida residents may be heeding the advice of bear advocates such as Katrina Shadix, a Seminole woman who is director of the nonprofit advocacy group Bear Warriors United, which has discouraged people from calling the FWC for fear the agency will kill a problem bear. She disagreed with the FWC's decision to put down the bear that killed the dogs in Longwood.

She faulted residents who didn't secure their garbage in neighborhoods along Markham Woods Road for unwittingly luring in the mama bear and her cubs.

"She wouldn't have been in that neighborhood in the first place if people had done the right thing to start with," said Shadix, who offered to retrofit garbage cans with locking devices.

The FWC identified the 236-pound bear as the animal identified in attacks on a poodle named Maggie and a Maltese-Yorkshire terrier mix in The Estates at Springs Landing.

The bear burst through a pool screen to snatch the poodle.

The bear also apparently had a knack for opening car doors as it was blamed for climbing into an SUV and shredding the interior. It also broke into a garage through a side door.

"Public safety is a top priority of the FWC, so this bear was humanely killed due to its escalating conflict behavior that posed a risk to the public," FWC spokesman Greg Workman said.

The bear often was seen in the company of two younger bears, one of which was also captured and then released in the Ocala National Forest. The other is still roaming the area.

Brenda York, 54, called the FWC in April after a big bear punched holes in her front door and cracked the door frame of her home in the Pine Lakes area of northeastern Lake County.

Though it ran off that day, it came back the next.

The FWC set a trap baited with doughnuts, caught and euthanized the 550-pound animal.

"My grandbabies was fixin' to come down for a visit," York said. "I felt bad. I even cried for the bear - but I didn't want my grandbabies hurt, neither."