

BearFacts from the Bureau of Wildlife

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BEARS AND BIRD FEEDERS

Although many people find it difficult to believe, an animal as large and powerful as a black bear is very attracted to bird feeders as a source of food. Black bears are, for the most part, vegetarians, and bird seed, even in minute quantities, is a highly desirable food for them. In many cases, it is *the* food of choice and will be sought out over other natural foods.

Bear nuisance complaint records reveal that, at certain times of the year, bird feeders are involved in over 80 percent of the bear problems. First and foremost, bears are attracted to backyards because of the presence of bird feeders. The problem often escalates to other food sources such as garbage cans, barbecue grills, and compost piles as bears become bolder and more acclimated to people. Such activities are not in the best interests of either the bears or the homeowners. Bears that learn to approach one house will approach other houses, and, invariably, this results in concern from unsuspecting people.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO BREAK THE PATTERN of black bears coming to houses for food. Fortunately, most bird feeding activities occur during winter when bears are in their dens. When bears emerge from their dens in March, natural foods are not abundant, and bird feeders represent an abundant food source. Therefore, we recommend that you cease your bird feeding activities by March if you live in bear country. Also important: residual seeds remaining on the ground will be attractive to bears. Either remove the seeds or treat the ground and seeds with a covering scent such as ammonia. Some people start feeding again during early summer and closely monitor their feeders. If any bears return, they stop filling their feeders and either remove the seeds scattered on the ground or sprinkle ammonia over them to cover the scent.

Many people feel that they can outsmart the bears by taking their feeders in at night. This may offer some relief; however, usually enough residual seed remains on the ground from day-

time feeding to attract bears. Others attempt to place the feeder high and out of reach of the bear. A bear's sense of smell is so great that the feeder will continue to attract the bear, even up high, and it won't discourage the bear from spending considerable time trying to figure out how to reach it. Some people have had success by mixing cayenne pepper with the bird seed to make it less palatable to bears. If you want to give it a try, use two rounded tablespoons of ground cayenne pepper for each five pounds of bird seed. This practice has some value with individual bears who will learn to avoid specific feeders . . . but . . . in bear country, every bear that finds the feeder will have to knock it down to learn that it contains pepper and is not a good feeding station. Removal of the attraction is the only long-term solution.

Some homeowners receive much satisfaction from their bird feeding activities and are reluctant to stop feeding. However, keep in mind that any feed placed out for wildlife is not species

specific . . . it is impossible to pick and choose which animals will be attracted and which animals will not. Any activity that attracts black bears close to homes should be carefully considered. The resulting presence of bears affects neighbors, too, and in the long run, does more harm to the bears than good. Bears that become accustomed to houses and people become chronic nuisances, suffer diet deficiencies from long-term consumption of improper foods, and often end up hit by cars or shot illegally by people who misunderstand the bears' intentions.

As is the case with almost all bear/human conflicts, if you take away the food, you will take away the bear.



A simple saying also applies . . .
“A fed bear is a dead bear.”