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Eye on the Environment: Bear break-ins remind us to be careful with food and garbage

By ANNE DAHL, Swan Ecosystem Center for the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

A grizzly bear with an affinity for white refrigerators has broken into at least five cabins and smashed a lot of windows in recent weeks on the east side of the Swan Valley. The intruder apparently passed by kitchens with a more colorful decor.

A black bear that seemed dazed or deaf was spotted several times wandering within a few yards of people relaxing on their decks at Lindbergh Lake. The bear climbed on porches sniffing for pet food, barbecue grills, bird feeders and other attractants. Around the same time, a Lindbergh Lake couple returned to their cabin and were greeted inside by a black bear. Sort of a reverse Goldilocks story.

A black bear at Lindbergh Lake ignored shouts and rocks flung by residents trying to save it from itself. It sat in a mountain ash eating red berries while the humans retreated inside and watched from their window a few feet away.

At a valley business, a bear busted through an electric fence to get at a grease trap, frustrating the store owners and State wildlife managers.

This is the time of year when bears are constantly hungry as they ready themselves for winter denning. And it's bear trap season

for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' grizzly bear specialist Tim Manley and black bear specialist Eric Wenum. During the first week of September they had three traps set in the Swan Valley.

The fridge griz alluded the trap set out for it. But an innocent black bear was caught and released. Another black bear was caught at Lindbergh Lake and moved to the South Fork of the Flathead for its own good.

The grizzly was still on the loose during the second week of September. The bear had left its signature at each break-in site: huge paw prints on the windows of the cabins it entered. In some cases a window may have been left open. But the shattered glass and blood on the sills indicated the bear had little concern for its own safety entering through closed windows in its quest for a meal. At one place the bear feasted on grain stored in a white freezer.

The grizzly had learned somewhere that white refrigerators hold rewards. Apparently it puts its nose on cabin windows and enters the kitchens where it can see a refrigerator. The grizzly broke into the Old Condon Ranger Station and knocked over the fridge, although the house had been vacant for several months and the ice box was empty.

This is why Tim and Eric tell us year after year to bring coolers inside even if they are empty. Bears are known for their powerful sense of smell and their dim eyesight. But their eyes are sharp enough to identify a cooler on the porch or in the back of a pickup. They know the shape of bird feeders and grills, whether they are clean and empty or not. When they spot these likely food sources they approach too closely for their safety and ours.

Garbage cans are recognizable, of course. If they have to be left outside, they need to be

bear resistant. The fridge griz pushed around one of the green 2-yard bear-resistant containers—the kind usually found at stores and restaurants—and smeared it with paw prints. But the bear failed to crack it open because the lid was properly shut.

Several people have reported that their smaller bear-resistant garbage cans designed for home use have been knocked over by bears who later ignored them because they had learned the containers couldn't be opened. Swan Ecosystem Center has home-use bear-resistant containers for sale or rent-to-own. They are also available for short-term loan.

All the garbage containers Swan Ecosystem Center provides have been tested by grizzlies at the Yellowstone Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, where huge captive bears have a lot of time on their hands. If a container can't be opened in 90 minutes by one of these muscular product-testers, it is deemed officially "bear resistant." Wild bears tend to give up more quickly than the captive bears, knowing they need to keep moving to find easier sustenance.

It's early in the hyperphasia period when bears need to eat nonstop. More bears will be lured onto porches and more canister traps will likely be set before winter sets in, especially if people are careless.

Chris Servheen, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, shows with his data we have grizzlies living with us throughout the valley. Bears are successfully avoiding trouble. Yet, because we share our backyards with grizzlies, every time we invite a bear into our front yards we put them and ourselves at risk. The Swan Valley is both a haven and a biological "sink" for grizzlies. They are drawn to the valley's rich habitat and to the attractants we

make available. Even my 8-year-old granddaughter understands this. "A fed bear is a dead bear," she reminds me repeatedly, whenever the topic comes up.

Mark Ruby is the Swan Valley Bear and Loon Ranger. He visits campsites in summer to talk with people about camping safely in bear country and encourages them to enjoy our lakes without disturbing loons. Mark will be working through October to help prevent human/bear conflicts around homes and businesses. He'll be reminding us to avoid trouble by locking up our food attractants and managing our garbage properly.

Mark will visit local schools to talk about bear safety. He will spend an afternoon with Swan Ecosystem Center's After School Club for 8-12-year-olds and play Bear Aware Jeopardy, a game he has devised that teaches kids the bear facts.

Mark's work is funded by Flathead National Forest; Lake County; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana Loon Society; Plum Creek Timber Company; Swan Ecosystem Center; and private donors who are proud to live in bear country and want to help keep the Swan Valley a wild place where people and wildlife can co-exist.