

## Get Wild: Let's care about bears

Stasia Stockwell



### **A black bear cub is pictured in Yellowstone National Park.**

*Richard Seeley/Get Wild*

Outdoor writer and former Colorado resident Brendan Leonard penned a humorous 2019 book entitled “Bears don’t care about your problems.” The book isn’t really about bears, but the title comes to mind when considering the fact that it’s the season when hungry bears emerge from their winter slumber and begin their search for spring forage. This search is often derailed by weather events, climate change and human impacts, forcing bears to venture out of the woods to find the food they need — making it more likely for us to encounter them. Sure, bears don’t care about our problems, but given that humans are in large part to blame for climate change and habitat encroachment or loss, we should probably care about bears’ problems.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife recently reported that human-bear sightings and conflicts [were up overall last year](#), with an increase in encounters in certain parts of the state, while other areas saw a decrease. Why the uptick in some areas but not others? Climate and human behavior give us at least part of the answer.

Drought is a major factor in determining where bears go, because moisture feeds their food sources. Typically, when certain parts of the state see phases of drought, we see an increase in bear activity closer to towns and urban areas. This is because the natural food sources for bears are lacking in that area, forcing them to seek other food sources — unfortunately those often end up being human garbage. Food sources for wildlife are also lost in wildfires, late frosts and other climate-related events. When bears have access to an ample food supply in their natural habitat, they’re not so inclined to venture closer to human habitats and often keep to themselves.

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Climate-related issues might force bears into human territory for food, but there’s also the issue of humans venturing into bear territory. In 2020, Colorado saw particularly high numbers of human and bear encounters. Statistics indicate that this is partially due to



more people getting outside during the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Sure, when bears come into our territory they're not always respectful. I once watched a bear rip open the empty cooler on my porch before making his way down to a neighbor's house to tear up their garage door. While bears don't care, we humans can and should. There are plenty of things we can do to be aware and respectful when we venture into the bear's neighborhood.

First, it's helpful to know that mid-March is when bears start to become active in Colorado. Mother bears with cubs tend to emerge towards the end of March and early April. So, as you head out onto the trails this spring, know that your chances of encountering a hungry bear increase as the days get longer and warmer. Staying on designated trails, keeping pets leashed and, when camping, storing food and trash in bear-proof canisters are all things we can do to minimize bear encounters and keep both humans and bears happy.

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As mountain town residents in Summit County, we should also be conscious of our trash. Of course, we should always pick up after ourselves and not litter on the trails or in the streets, but keeping trash bins securely locked up is just as important. Sadly, bears that become accustomed to humans often end up euthanized. So, this spring as you get outside, remember that bears really just want to be left alone to eat their natural foods and if we care a little, we can help them do that without humans getting in the way.



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