

# Get Wild: When your neighbors are bears

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**Frances Hartogh**  
**Get Wild**



A mother black bear and her two cubs are pictured near Lyons in June 2019.  
*Photo by David Neils / Wild Nature Media*

Black bears have lived in Summit County and our wilderness areas since long before the pioneers arrived. Today, these resourceful, complex, beautiful creatures share their habitat with an ever-encroaching human population. Human-bear encounters are on the rise – sometimes with unfortunate results. But a few commonsense precautions can minimize risks to bears and humans.

First, let's learn a bit about our amazing ursine neighbors. Black bears aren't always black: They can be brown, cinnamon or even blond. Bears can pick up scents from over a mile away and have the best sense of smell of any land mammal.

Despite those impressive teeth, over 90% of their natural diet consists of grasses, berries, fruits, nuts and other plants, with their remaining diet being mainly insects and scavenged carcasses. Our local bears favor aspen and oak areas with native fruits like chokecherry and serviceberry and will home in on recent fire areas to eat the new, green growth. Bears also love to [wallow in cold, muddy water](#) .

Locally, bears have emerged from a monthslong torpor, or hibernation, during which they reduce their breathing, heart and metabolic rates without eating, drinking or passing waste. Quite understandably, bears are ravenous, which can lead to problems when their keen sense of smell encounters odors from human food or garbage, causing them to overcome their natural fear of people.



Curious and adaptable, black bears will eat just about anything with calories. They need up to 20,000 calories per day (more than 35 Big Macs) to get fat enough to survive winter.

Tom Davies, district wildlife manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, has noticed that with winter storms coming later each year, black bears seem to be going into hibernation later, creating more human-wildlife conflicts.

Here are a few rules to ensure that we don't endanger bears:

- Never feed bears or put out food for wildlife that attracts bears, including bird feeders
- Secure pets, pet food and trash out of the reach of bears
- Thoroughly clean barbecues after each use
- Lock bear-accessible windows and doors
- Don't leave food, trash, coolers, air fresheners or anything that smells in your vehicle, and lock your car doors
- Remove ripe and fallen fruit from your property
- Never place your garbage out the night before pickup
- If a bear approaches your home, try to scare it away by yelling, blowing a whistle, clapping your hands or banging pans

Be especially aware of bears when hiking or camping. Leash your pet, store food and anything that smells in a bear-proof container away from your tent, and be aware of your surroundings so you don't surprise a bear or get between a mama and her cubs.

If you are fortunate to see a bear, stay calm, stand up, speak calmly and confidently to distinguish your voice from that of a prey animal, pick up small children, pack food into your backpack and put your pack on, raise arms overhead if possible and slowly back away, giving the bear space to leave. In the highly unlikely event of an attack, fight back and concentrate blows or kicks on the bear's face and muzzle.

We have to respect bears and understand that we live in their habitat. Sadly, bears that become used to humans often end up euthanized. While our state's policy is to tag and relocate a problem bear, if a bear is caught again, it's killed. And bears that act aggressively can be euthanized even if not tagged.

Don't be responsible for the loss of these beautiful creatures. Do your part to bear-proof yourself, your home and your property. Let's keep bears alive and keep the wild in wildlife!





Frances Hartogh

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a board member and volunteer wilderness ranger for the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

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