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Study shows Aspen bears aren't addicted to trash

Bruins still remain in the wild when the natural food supply is good

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ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

ASPEN – There's apparently no such thing as a bad bear, just a hungry one.

The latest results of a multiyear study of bears in the Aspen area indicate bruins don't get addicted to garbage. They troll town for food in trash containers and for other human sources of refuse during years when the natural food supply is poor. But the study also established that they stay in the backcountry and largely avoid town during years when the natural food supply is good, said Sharon Baruch-Mordo, a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University.

While the results might seem intuitive – that wildlife prefers the wild – it provides proof that bears aren't necessarily habituated to human handouts. Baruch-Mordo told the Pitkin County commissioners during a presentation Tuesday that one of the questions she wanted answered by the research from a bear's perspective was, "If I find those fields of gold of trash, why would I ever leave?"

The Roaring Fork Urban Bear Ecology Study has been tracking scores of bruins in the Aspen area since 2005. Bears are fitted with collars that track their movements. Researchers analyze their travel patterns.

A female bear who is now 13 years of age, known simply as Bear No. 4 in the study, has been tracked since 2005. In 2007 and 2009, when natural food supplies were poor, she was "all over town," Baruch-Mordo said, displaying maps that used red dots to show where the bear traveled those two summers. Aspen was blotted out by the red dots.

In contrast, two maps showing the same bruin's travel patterns during two years when the natural food supply was good indicated she rarely ventured into Aspen, and then just on the periphery.

Baruch-Mordo is leading the study, which is a joint venture between CSU, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

The preliminary findings indicate Aspen's problem with human-bear conflicts can be eased, Baruch-Mordo said. Bears won't give up chokecherries and service berries for picked-over prime rib and baked potatoes in trash containers.

That's good, she said, and it shows that the key to reducing the number of conflicts is for residents of

Aspen and surrounding areas to make sure garbage is secured at all times, particularly when natural food crops fail or are poor, said Baruch-Mordo and Stewart Breck, a research biologist with the National Wildlife Research Center in Fort Collins.

When natural crops fail, “you're going to have bears pouring into Aspen,” Breck said. The area surrounding Aspen is some of the best bear habitat in the state, they said.

The research also indicates the selection of trash containers is a vital deterrent. Residential containers must be highly rated as bear-resistant. Aspen toughened its trash container regulations June 1. Read more about that at www.aspenbears.com.

Various education programs used to alert Aspenites, including the high number of second-home owners and tourists, haven't been very successful thus far, Baruch-Mordo said. Pitkin County, Aspen and the state wildlife division are adjusting their efforts accordingly to get the word out about securing trash.

Baruch-Mordo said the human-bear conflicts are taxing the resources of the wildlife division. The state agency spent roughly 5,000 hours and \$200,000 dealing with human-bear conflicts in 2009. The problems existed even though 80 “problem” bears were killed or removed from the Aspen area in 2007.

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