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DEP'S DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE OFFER TIPS TO HELP REDUCE ENCOUNTERS WITH BLACK BEARS BEARS EMERGING FROM DENS ARE LOOKING FOR FOOD AND MATES

(17/P31) TRENTON - The Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish and Wildlife is providing property owners and outdoors enthusiasts with precautions that should be followed to reduce the potential for encounters with black bears, which are emerging from winter dens and are searching for food and mates.

"It is particularly important for residents of the northwestern part of the state, which has the state's densest population, to understand and follow some commonsense guidelines to reduce the chances of a bear coming onto their properties," said Division of Fish and Wildlife Acting Director Larry Herrighty. "It is also a good time for anyone who spends time outdoors to become familiar with ways to avoid encounters with bears, and how to react when an encounter is unavoidable."

Bears have an acute sense of smell, and can detect scents more than two miles away. The most common problem property owners experience is black bears getting into garbage. Another common problem is unintentional bear feeding by homeowners, who unwittingly make household trash, pet foods and other food sources easily available for bears to find and eat.

Although bears are by nature wary of people, bears attracted to neighborhoods may learn to associate people with food. These animals may become nuisance bears that may cause property damage or seek handouts from people. Intentional feeding of a bear is illegal and carries a fine of up to \$1,000.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife offers the following tips for property owners to minimize conflicts with bears:

- * Secure your trash and eliminate obvious sources of food, such as pet food on decks, easy-to-reach bird feeders, or food residues left in barbecue grills.
- * Use certified bear-resistant garbage containers if possible. Otherwise, store all garbage in containers with tight-fitting lids and place them along the inside walls of your garage, or in the basement, a sturdy shed or other secure area.
- * Wash garbage containers frequently with a disinfectant solution to remove odors. Put out garbage on collection day, not the night before.

- * Avoid feeding birds when bears are active. If you choose to feed birds, do so during daylight hours only and bring feeders indoors at night. Suspend birdfeeders from a free-hanging wire, making sure they are at least 10 feet off the ground. Clean up spilled seeds and shells daily.
- * Immediately remove all uneaten food and food bowls used by pets fed outdoors.
- * Clean outdoor grills and utensils to remove food and grease residue. Store grills securely.
- * Do not place meat or any sweet foods in compost piles.
- * Remove fruit or nuts that fall from trees in your yard.
- * Install electric fencing as an effective way to protect crops, beehives and livestock.

If you encounter a black bear in your neighborhood or outdoors while hiking or camping, follow these common-sense safety tips:

- * Remain calm. Never run from a bear. This may trigger its predatory instinct. Instead, slowly back away. Avoid direct eye contact, which may be perceived by a bear as a challenge. Make sure the bear has an escape route.
- * To scare the bear away, make loud noises by yelling, using a whistle, banging pots and pans or blowing an air horn. Make yourself look as big as possible by waving your arms. If you are with someone else, stand close together with your arms raised above your head.
- * Make bears aware of your presence by speaking in an assertive voice, singing, clapping your hands, or making other noises. If hiking through bear country, always make your presence known through loud talking or clapping of hands.
- * If a bear enters your home, provide it with ways to get out by propping all doors open
- * The bear may utter a series of huffs, make popping jaw sounds by snapping its jaws and swat the ground. These are warning signs that you are too close. Slowly back away, avoid direct eye contact. Do not run.
- * If a bear stands on its hind legs or moves closer, it may be trying to get a better view or detect scents in the air. This is usually not a threatening behavior.
- * Black bears will sometimes "bluff charge" when cornered, threatened or attempting to steal food. Stand your ground, avoid direct eye contact, then slowly back away and do not run.

- * If the bear does not leave, move to a secure area, such as a vehicle or a building.
- * Families who live in areas frequented by black bears should have a "Bear Plan" in place for children, with an escape route and planned use of whistles and air horns.
- * Black bear attacks are extremely rare. If a black bear does attack, fight back.

The black bear is New Jersey's largest land animal. It is an integral part of the state's natural heritage and is a vital part of healthy ecosystems. Black bears have been sighted in all 21 counties, but their population is densest in the northwestern part of the state, including Sussex, Warren, Passaic and Morris counties.

DEP wildlife experts stress that a black bear simply passing through an area and not causing a specific problem, such as breaking into trash or otherwise trying to access food sources on peoples' properties or posing a safety threat, should be left alone. The Division of Fish and Wildlife advises people to leave the area and allow the bear to continue on its way. When frightened, bears may seek refuge by climbing trees.

Report bear damage, nuisance behavior or aggressive bears to the Wildlife Control Unit of the DEP's Division of Fish and Wildlife at (908) 735-8793. During evenings and weekends, residents should call the local police department or the DEP Hotline at 877-WARN-DEP (877-927-6337).

To learn more about New Jersey's black bears, their history in New Jersey and ways to avoid problems with them, visit www.nj.gov/dep/fgw/bearfacts.htm.