Land, Water and People

Camping with bears

By Mike Blakeman

The visitor information specialists that staff our front desks are often asked about bears on the National Forest and Bureau of Land Management lands. We appreciate those questions because many people don't give bears a second thought, which sometimes leads to unwanted and unnecessary bear-human confrontations.

Black bears roam the foothills and mountains that surround the San Luis Valley. Although they are called "black" bears, they actually come in a range of browns, besides jet black. Relatively speaking, they aren't exactly abundant in the upper Rio Grande, but their population is higher than many folks think. Few people visiting this area ever see a bear, because bears *generally* prefer to avoid people.

Most of a black bear's diet is made up of vegetation, berries, nuts and insects. Depending on the area, weather and the time of year, they sometimes have to work hard to find their food in nature. Unfortunately, when people leave food out while camping, they may be inadvertently sounding the death knell for a bear. Black bears have good sniffers and are attracted to easy pickings found at campgrounds. Once a bear starts coming into a campground to search for snacks, it is hard to break the habit.

Black bears that become habituated to people are actually the most dangerous. They become bolder and bolder, and finally may start "demanding" handouts. These beggar bears may tear apart coolers and tents to get to food and sometimes will even swat a person that gets too close. The Colorado Division of Wildlife then has to step in to try to scare the bear away. If that doesn't work, the bear may have to be destroyed.

Problem bears are the result of problem people. A few simple precautions can help save the lives of our beautiful black bears. For example:

- Clean up all food scraps and dispose of them in bear proof dumpsters or seal them in an air tight container and store them in your vehicle or trailer.
- Don't leave food out after your meals. Instead, keep food sealed up and in your vehicle or trailer.
- Clean off your grill after using; the grease will attract bears.
- Take your hummingbird feeder into your trailer at night.
- Don't eat or leave food inside a tent.

The last point reminds me of the time a couple camping in Trujillo Meadows Campground was specifically told not to eat or leave food in their tent. They ignored our advice and the next morning they were both shocked and mad, because a bear tore into their tent during the night while they were sleeping. The couple told a Forest Service employee it was her fault for not controlling the bear!

In our area, bears usually aren't a problem in the backcountry away from campgrounds. Still, it is just good policy to either hang your food in a tree or store it in a bear proof container. The important thing is to never give a bear the opportunity to taste human food.

So, please, help keep our bears alive by keeping your camp clean.

Mike Blakeman is the public affairs officer for the San Luis Valley Public Lands Center. He spends much of his free time scrambling around the mountains with a camera in his hand.