



News Release

Monongahela National Forest

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BE BEAR AWARE!!!

(Elkins, WV) Officials with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, and the Monongahela National Forest are cautioning visitors to the wild lands of the State to be extra aware of black bears this late summer and fall. In recent weeks hikers and campers have reported numerous encounters with bears, many of whom appear to be seeking food. “The late spring frosts killed the flower buds of many species which would otherwise have provided summer food for bears,” notes Dick Hall, Supervisor of Game Management for the DNR Wildlife Resources Section. “This lack of ‘soft mast’ is becoming apparent as bears seek food from humans. The fall ‘hard mast’ crop of nuts and acorns is likely to also be variable so it is important people realize that bear behavior this year may be different than in years with abundant natural crops.”

Visitors to the Dolly Sods area of the Monongahela National Forest have reported seeing many more bears than is common, and several encounters have been tense. Signs alerting hikers have been posted at all of the trail entrances, and changes are being made in how the trash cans at Red Creek Campground are being managed. “Bear-proof trash cans haven’t been necessary in this area in the past” noted acting Cheat-Potomac District Ranger Kristine Vollmer, “but we’ve had several instances lately of bears coming into the campground and rummaging through the existing cans in search of food. We’re going to place the cans inside a cage to discourage the bears until we can purchase and install the bear-proof containers.”

Officials of both agencies note that there is no substitute for common sense however, and strongly urge people to learn and practice safe food management in bear country. Campers are always safest in hard-sided campers or vehicles rather than in a tent. However, even tent campers can minimize the chance of a negative bear encounter. If camping in the campground ALL food should be stored in the vehicle. A bear can smell even a candy bar inside a tent. Once a meal is concluded the cooking equipment should be immediately washed and it, along with any leftover food should be placed in the vehicle.

Hikers can reduce the possibility of a bear getting into their food by stringing a high line between two trees, at least 10 feet above ground and hanging food in a bag from the line. The bag should be located at least four feet from the trees on either side. Food can also be suspended in a bag from a line over a tree branch at least 10 feet above ground, and hanging down at least 4 feet from the branch. If there are no trees tall enough to hang food from it is recommended that hikers store their food in tightly closed, hard-shelled containers. To reduce the possibility of an

interaction with a bear seeking food, sleeping tents should be placed at least 100 yards away from food storage and cooking areas. Cooking equipment should be cleaned away from the sleeping area and stored with the food.

Hikers are also encouraged to learn how to hike safely in bear country, which includes being sure to make enough noise that the bears are aware people are in the area. If their pack contains food, hikers should be aware that a hungry bear may pursue the pack even though they might ordinarily simply move away from a person waving at them and making noise. Dropping the pack and moving away from it may diffuse the encounter. Alter your route if the bear is visible but not close. If a black bear approaches officials recommend facing the bear, remaining calm and slowly backing away. If the bear continues to approach it is recommended that people try to scare the bear away by making noise, shouting, waving shirts and other objects to make themselves appear larger. Finally, if a black bear follows through with an attack, which is rare, it is suggested that people fight back using fists, rocks and E.P.A. registered bear pepper spray. It is recommended that pepper spray not be used unless the bear is actually attacking.

“The bottom line is that people enter the natural habitat of black bears when they go into the woods in West Virginia,” says Hall. “We can focus on removing problem bears from campgrounds if necessary, but people need to recognize how to keep themselves safe as they enjoy the wild lands of the State. Once a bear has been successful in obtaining food from humans it is more likely to continue to try to do so.”

Vollmer echoed the message with the comment that “We’ll do the best we can to help campers have a more secure location for their trash at Red Creek Campground, and to sign the trailheads and campground, but we can’t keep the bears from searching for food.” Both officials cautioned that as the fall approaches bears preparing for hibernation will continue to search for food so people need to exercise extra care as they hike, camp, and hunt this year.

To learn more about safe living and hiking in black bear country, log onto www.bebearaware.org.

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