

Here are the answers to how to safely live with bears and help keep Vermont's bears wild.

There is a bear in my yard. What can I do?

It is important you do not approach the bear or attempt to chase it away. Do not allow children or pets to approach the bear. You can reach out the door to bang together pots and pans or make other loud noises to scare the bear away.

Once the bear has left, the best thing you can do is to determine what attracted the bear and remove that attractant.

What time of year can I feed birds in my yard without attracting black bears?

You can put a birdfeeder out on December 1, or after the onset of prolonged snowy winter weather. You should take a birdfeeder down by April 1 at the latest.

If there is an early spring with melted snow and warm weather, it is a good idea to take your bird feeder down early. Bird seed is extremely high in fat and is very difficult for hungry bears to resist.

How can I keep bears out of my garbage? How do I get a bear-proof dumpster?

Keep dumpster and trash containers secured at all times. Trash cans should not be placed on the curb until the day of pickup. Until then, all garbage containers should be secured in a well-constructed shed, garage or basement.

Double-bag smelly garbage and regularly clean trash cans with a deodorizer like ammonia to reduce food odors that attract bears.

Consider using ammonia as a cover scent for garbage odor by pouring and leaving a small amount of ammonia in the trash can or by placing ammonia-soaked rags in the garbage can.

If bears are able to get into a shed used for storing garbage, find a more secure location, remove all attractants and spilled garbage, deodorize, then leave shed doors open to prevent property damage. The bear will leave unrewarded and eventually learn that the easy food source is gone.

Bear-proof dumpsters can often be obtained from your local dumpster provider if you are persistent. The most common designs are metal tops that can be secured with chain hooks, or side-access panels that can be closed securely. Plywood covers and the means to stabilize smaller dumpsters are also worth considering.

How can I protect my beehive from bear attacks?

Bears now occur throughout most of the state, and domestic beehives can be very difficult for a bear to pass up. Electric fencing—using a "net fence" or configured with 4 strands of fence conductor spaced at 10 inches apart, and located at least 3 feet away from the hive—can be very effective. Bears are very sensitive to electric current, particularly if it's a wet nose or tongue touching an electric fence while the bear is standing on wet grass.

In addition to fencing, avoid placing hives near areas of known bear activity or areas where bears feel secure while foraging. Place items such as beehives in areas where bears must risk decreased security while investigating the attractant. This means avoiding areas near streams and wetlands, power lines or wooded areas. Strapping or stapling the hive supers together can minimize damage to the honeybees' brood nest in cool or wet weather if the hive is knocked over. It also allows the colony to better defend itself.

For more information on electric fence configurations call the USDA Wildlife Service toll free number at 1-888-749-2327 (1-888-SHY-BEAR) or visit these websites:

- [Installing Electric Fencing Around Apiaries](#)
- [Houndsman Bee Damage Brochure](#)
- [Get Bear Smart Society - Electric Fencing](#)
- [Electric Bear Fencing Supplies](#)

I have a bear that is raiding my bird-feeder/chicken coop/dog food bowl/bee hive. Am I allowed to take lethal measures against the bear?

By law, before you can take lethal measures against a black bear, you must first take reasonable nonlethal measures to avoid attracting bears. This includes removing bird-feeders, enclosing bee hives or chicken coops in electric fencing, taking additional measures to secure garbage, and feeding dogs or cats inside. Call the Fish & Wildlife Department at 802-828-1000 immediately for advice. The sooner a bear problem can be contained, the less likely the bear is to become a persistent nuisance.

Is it legal to feed black bears in Vermont?

It is against the law to intentionally feed black bears in Vermont, regardless of whether or not that person is hunting black bears. This includes knowingly leaving out food that is not intended for black bears but is attracting bears anyway, including bird-feeders, dog food left outside, or unattended garbage. It may also in some cases include unprotected bee hives and chicken coops.

Will the state reimburse me for the cost of losses to my apple trees, garden, chickens or bee hive that have been damaged by a bear?

The Fish & Wildlife Department does not reimburse people for agricultural losses due to bears unless that individual makes at least 50 percent of their income from farming. In order to get reimbursement, the land must also not be posted against hunting and must be owned by the farmer rather than leased.

Will wildlife officials relocate a bear that has become a nuisance on my property?

Wildlife officials will generally not relocate a bear that has become a nuisance. Bears are extremely difficult to relocate once they have become accustomed to human food sources. A bear that has learned that garbage cans or bird feeders represent an easy meal will continue to be a nuisance to people no matter where you move it.

This is especially true in Vermont where there is simply not enough open space without people living nearby to move a bear far enough away that it will not return to people's yards to seek food. The best thing you can do is to not attract a bear in the first place by not providing easy meals for it. Bears that have become acclimated to human foods are usually euthanized. Remember, a fed bear is a dead bear.

What does the phrase ‘a fed bear is a dead bear’ mean?

Bears that are fed by people quickly learn that people = food. This can be from people who feed bears intentionally by leaving food out to purposely attract them, or unintentionally by leaving birdfeeders out during the summer and fall.

Bears develop a habit of raiding people’s back yards for food, and because they often cannot be relocated, wildlife officials typically have to euthanize the bear. And remember, it is now illegal to feed a bear in Vermont.

Is it safe to hike and camp in Vermont’s woods with bears out there?

Black bears are elusive and shy – they typically want nothing to do with people in the woods, and Vermont’s bear hunting season reinforces that behavior. Thanks to their strong sense of smell, black bears are typically able to avoid people who are hiking and camping in the backcountry. Vermont’s bears are not as bold about stealing food from campers as some well-known bear populations in Yellowstone or in the Adirondacks.

However, there are a few things that you can do to avoid a negative bear encounter when hiking or camping:

- Be careful not to leave food scraps when preparing your meal or cleaning up afterward.
- Cook meals away from your tent.
- Don’t eat in your tent, and don’t leave food out that could potentially attract bears to your campsite.
- Securing food in a bear-proof container or hanging it in a tree will also keep food from bears.
- If a bear comes into your campsite, yell and bang pots together to scare the bear away.

Are black bears dangerous?

Yes and no. Black bears are quite capable of killing people. However, they are generally very shy and will typically do everything they can to avoid people and to avoid confrontation. The last death from a bear in Vermont was in 1943 when a hunter tried to finish a bear off with a knife rather than his gun and was killed by the bear in the struggle.

The most dangerous thing you can do around a bear is to feed it. Bears are naturally wary and rarely present a physical danger to people who act appropriately around them. Feeding a bear can cause a bear to lose its natural fear of people and become aggressive.

What should I do if I encounter a bear in the woods?

Never intentionally approach a bear. If you encounter a bear, they are usually safe to watch briefly from a distance with binoculars. If your presence causes the bear to change its behavior – it stops feeding, changes its travel direction, or watches you – you’re too close and you should back away from the bear, while maintaining eye contact. Never run away, as this may trigger a response in the bear and cause it to chase you.

When do bears den? When will they come out in the spring?

Bears go into their dens based on food availability and snow cover. If food is plentiful and the temperatures remain above freezing, they may not go into their dens until late November or early December. If food is particularly scarce or the ground is covered with snow, they may go into their dens by mid-October.

Similarly, Vermont's bears change their emergence date based on weather conditions and food availability, and also on when they went into the den. A bear that was poorly fed in the fall and went into the den early may emerge by mid-March, particularly if warm temperatures have exposed spring shoots and roots. A well-fed female bear during a particularly cold spring may not emerge until mid-April.

During periods of winter thaws, male bears may occasionally get up and move around until cold weather returns.

When are bear cubs born?

Cubs are born in winter dens during January after a gestation period of about eight months. Newborn cubs are born hairless, with eyes closed, measuring six to eight inches in length, and weigh less than one pound. Cubs stay with their mother for approximately 18 months and den with her again during the following winter. When they are a year and a half old, cubs leave their mothers during the June/July mating season.

What do we know about Vermont's black bear population?

Vermont's bear population is large and healthy. In some parts of the state we need to slowly stabilize the population. Department biologists estimate Vermont's bear population at about 6,000 animals, which is at the upper end of the population goals outlined in the Vermont Big Game Management Plan (2010-2020). Legal, carefully regulated ethical hunting is the most effective population control tool we have.