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## **Eye on the Environment: A Season for Awareness**

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Long days in the warm sun, cool evenings with friends, and weekends spent camping and in the woods. Its summer in the valley and around every bend people are barbecuing, swimming, fishing, and gearing up for berry season—the quintessential hallmarks of summer.

Living in the splendor and activity of the season makes it easy to forget that wildlife too enjoys the warmth and abundance of the summer months. Bear sightings are more often than not, a common part of summer in the mountains. Though bears are a more prevalent thought in residents' minds during the fall when bears are feeding heavily and preparing for winter, and in the spring when they wake from their season of hibernation, bears are still incredibly active in valley bottoms during the summer months. It is within the warmth of the June, July, and August that most bears spend their days browsing for food sources, breeding, and raising young.

The Seeley-Swan Valley has a relatively recent history of struggling bear populations, with grizzly bears bearing the brunt of the slump. However, in the past few decades, due to legislation under the Endangered Species Act and diligent conservation efforts, the decline of bears on the landscape has slowed. The Seeley-Swan has been home to at least 45 grizzly bears following a study four years ago and is host to a black bear population with an estimated density of one adult bear per square mile. Hopeful news, but with a stabilizing population so comes new challenges.

As human populations begin to grow and development blossoms in the Seeley-Swan, human-bear conflict has become a major concern for both bear and human safety. Bear-human conflict takes many forms, the least common of which is physical confrontation between bears and residents—rarely do bears initiate an unprovoked attack on humans. However, bears being hit along roadways, poaching, and misidentification during hunting season are all measured examples of direct conflicts that contribute to bear mortality.

In spite of these incidences, the most common form of human-bear conflict reported in communities like the Seeley-Swan is the habituation of bears to human property and food sources. Having a bear that gets into garbage, livestock feed, or is milling around populated areas is a nuisance to any homeowner—and a serious concern when it comes to human-bear interaction.

Bears are predominantly scavengers and an easy meal from a dumpster or grain bucket looks far more appealing to a hungry bear than can often be resisted—causing serious problems to arise. The habituation of both black and grizzly bears, or those bears becoming accustomed to human-related food sources, creates a population of “nuisance bears” that can cause damage to property and drastically increase the probability of further friction with human residents.

The habituation of bears in the Seeley-Swan is a serious concern, but it is also a very manageable problem. Limiting attractants around individual homes and properties can make a life or death difference to a curious and hungry bear; and most suggested preventative measures are simple and easy to implement. The most perpetrating attractants around homes tend to be improperly handled garbage and food waste, bird feeders, and unsecured horse and livestock feed but things like fruit trees, barbecues, and coolers left out in the yard can draw in a curious bear as well. All of these however are relatively simple to manage around you own home.

For bird feeders-

It is suggested that using bird feeders on your property is avoided, but when used should be hung at least 10 feet from the ground and 4 feet from the nearest tree or building. If not hung, bird feeders should be taken in at night.

For pet and livestock feed-

Ideally, store all pet food and grain indoors in sealed containers. Be sure to empty and/or take food dishes and grain buckets in at night.

For barbeques-

After cooking, burn and/or wash the barbeque clean of food residue and odors. If possible, take your barbeque in at night.

And for garbage-

Never leave garbage outside of dumpsters, and never leave waste unattended in insecure dumpsters for extended periods of time. Ideally, bring your garbage to the curb a few hours before pick-up and retrieve your bin as soon as possible.

Many communities like Seeley Lake and Condon also have programs that work to place bear-resistant garbage containers in the hands of homeowners. Containers like UnBearAble Bins and Bearsaver bins are available from both the Swan Ecosystem Center and Seeley Bear Aware program to help homeowners prevent the habituation of bears to their property. Both programs have had significant success in helping residents dispose of their household waste as well as placing commercial dumpsters at businesses like the Hungry Bear Steakhouse and Mission Mountain Mercantile in Condon, among others.

The goal in communities like the Seeley-Swan is to *prevent* human-bear conflict by being proactive in the management of personal properties and the promotion of bear savvy residents. This valley has come a long way in the struggle to stabilize bear populations and promote an amiable co-existence between

human and bear residents, and momentum is building to make this community truly bear aware.

Fostering awareness and care in the interactions between bears and the community allows both to enjoy the spoils of summer, the distinction of this valley, and the assurance of co-existence into the future.

For more information on how to make your home bear safe, or to inquire about bear-proof garbage bins contact the Swan Ecosystem Center (406) 754-3137 or Seeley Bear Aware (406) 531-6007.

For more information on the status of bears in the valley, bear safety, as well as information from a number of other presenters, come to the first annual

Bear Fair  
Saturday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>  
11 am – 4 pm

Hungry Bear Steakhouse in Condon.  
FREE food, beverages, prizes, and family activities. For more information visit Northwest Connection's website at [www.northwestconnections.org](http://www.northwestconnections.org)