

What's all the hype about garbage, bait, and bears?



*The four closed bins on the left are bear resistant. *
The fifth, an open can, is not.*



*Black bear feeding at deer bait station in Sussex
County, New Jersey, August 2006.*



Access to Unsecured Bins, dumpsters, and bait

Easy access to garbage and bait changes black bear behavior and foraging habits. Feeding can lead to food conditioning, habituation to humans, conflicts, and property damage. Researchers attributed 35 percent of human-bear conflicts in Yosemite National Park to conditioned bears. Many other incidents are due to human error (improperly stored food and trash). Feeding via trash or bait also leads to increased reproductive rates, physical size and numbers, and reduced bear range.

In the U.S. and Canada, Bear Towns are Getting Serious About Trash

In the United States, the governments of Teton County, Wyoming; Teton County, Idaho, Aspen, Colorado; and Juneau, Alaska, among others, have mandated bear-resistant bins and dumpsters. Aspen officials advise that the ordinances are in place “to ensure your safety and the safety of our wildlife. When wildlife has access to trash, it brings them closer to our homes, creating a potentially dangerous situation for animals and people.”

Key Facts:

1. Bear incidents rise and fall during hunting seasons and in the absence of it. There is also no correlation between the number of bears and incidents. In 2001, the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) estimated about 1,777 bears in northern New Jersey. The total number of incidents reported in that year numbered 1,736. In 2020, DFW estimated 3,158 bears, and the total number of incidents was 1,407.
2. When non-lethal black bear management programs are in place, complaints and incidents go down. In 2005, Rutgers' professor, Dr. Edward A. Tavvs, studied the correlation between the reduction in black bear complaints and the implementation of a non-lethal program. The non-lethal approach, focusing on garbage control, results in reduced complaints.¹

New Black Bear Feeding Ban

In 2002, then Senator Robert E. Littell (Republican representing the 24th Legislative District in Sussex County) enacted the Black Bear Feeding Law (NJS 23:2A-14). The goal was to limit bears' access to unnatural food. Unfortunately, enforcement is poor. A new bill, S1891/A1967 addresses enforcement issues and ambiguous language in the current law.

Key Points - S1891/A1967:²

- Includes unintentional and intentional feeding or baiting of bear and deer. Whether it's intentional or not, feeding bears leads to food conditioning, which contributes to human-bear conflicts.
- Incentivizes enforcement by allowing the penalties to go to the municipality, not the state, which is supported by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.
- Exempts wildlife rehabbers; agricultural or horticultural activities; birdfeeders between 4/1 – 11/30; shelters; approved TNR colonies; feeding companion animals; and federal, state, or local authorities that require feeding for scientific purposes.
- Helps to reduce the cost of bear-resistant cans when trash haulers purchase bear-resistant cans in bulk, passing the savings on to customers.

The takeaway: keeping bears away from human-derived foods is key to reducing sightings, incidents, and bear reproduction. A fed bear is a bred bear. Getting affordable cans to bear country residents is essential. Legislators and residents who care about reducing bear incidents should support legislation that limits bears access to human food.

* Recently, a bear was seen in Sussex County unscrewing this type of bear-resistant can, proving that we need to be smarter than the average bear. Fortunately, there are many different types of bear-resistant garbage cans. Video: <https://tinyurl.com/SmarterBearNJ>

¹ <http://www.bearsmartnj.org/images/Nonlethal%20Report%20-%202005%20Tavss.pdf>

² <https://apl.nj.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022-S1891-A1967-FactSheet.pdf>