

Studies: Hunting won't stop nuisance bears

By **ROB CHANEY** of the Missoulian

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Hunting may not be the tool wildlife managers hoped for to keep black bears from burgling garages and garbage.

Extensive studies in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Ontario found that more liberal bear hunting seasons could get more bears killed, but couldn't weed out nuisance bears selectively.

In fact, hunting had almost no effect on the number of bear complaints homeowners phoned to game wardens.

On a related note, many of the 300 bear experts at the Fourth International Human-Bear Conflicts Workshop in Missoula this week agreed that using phone calls to gauge bear trouble was a lousy measuring stick.

"In Wisconsin, there are no bear conflicts on weekends" – when there's no staff to answer the phone, said Zach Voyles of the University of Wisconsin. He added if game wardens stopped answering weekday calls at 3 p.m., they'd see another dramatic drop in their workload.

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“We actually found when we took more bears (through hunting), we got more complaints,” Voyles said. “We also found no evidence to show that hunting helps reduce conflicts. In some counties, the opposite almost appears to be true.”

Mark Ternent of the Pennsylvania Game Commission recounted that state’s extensive efforts to monitor the black bear population. Its wardens trap and study hundreds of bears annually, resulting in a powerful database of bear identities that’s linked to records of bear conflicts.

Pennsylvania has about 18,000 bears, 116,000 bear hunters and usually a three-day hunting season just before Thanksgiving. Its deer season runs two weeks after Thanksgiving, and attracts 900,000 hunters.

Ternent said deer hunters tend to work closer to residential areas than bear hunters do. So on some years, game managers overlapped the bear and deer seasons, hoping that deer hunters might opportunistically take nuisance bears hanging around homes and birdfeeders.

“We found nuisance bears got killed equally as often as non-conflict bears,” Ternent said. “When we’d reached a 50 percent reduction in the population, the public started telling us that’s far enough. And the number of complaints (about bear break-ins) didn’t correlate to anything. When the population dropped 50 percent, the complaints actually rose.”

One thing the study indicated was that bears who cause trouble around homes in the summer tend to move into less settled areas in the fall. The hunters couldn’t tell nuisance bears from good bears, and so took more of both.

Zach Turnbull of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department said wardens there have a different tactic that works with some success.

When they investigate a bear conflict incident, the wardens encourage the landowner to informally spread the word that a problem bear is in the area. Word-of-mouth recommendations often draw licensed hunters and increase the chance the unwanted bear will be killed.

“Using hunters to resolve bear conflicts has been a small part of our strategy, but one with high success,” Turnbull said.

But Wyoming also offers two bear hunting seasons a year covering nearly five months of opportunity. Wisconsin allows roughly one month to hunt black bears.

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