

LAKE TAHOE

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Officers get tools to scare the bears

By Gregory Crofton
Tribune staff writer

There's a big brown bear swimming in a pile of garbage. There's a police officer with a shotgun. But hold on, this scenario doesn't mean the bear is going to die.

Increasingly law enforcement scares off bears nosing in neighborhoods with shotguns loaded with rubber bullets or blanks that explode with light and noise. With the bear gone, officers talk to the residents and instruct them to put away the garbage or food that attracted the wildlife.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department on Wednesday received two bear aversion kits to jump-start its program. The kits, worth \$200 a piece, came as donations from the BEAR League, an organization based in Homewood that works to protect the animals.

"Most of the calls don't ever reach the newspaper," said South Lake Tahoe police Officer Scott Willson, who organized bear aversion training for 14 officers in his department last month.

"We tell the homeowner to leave the bear alone," Willson said. "And what we've learned through training is to make sure the bears have an escape route."

Willson said before he or other officers go to shoot rubber at a bear, they attempt to scare it by taking an aggressive posture

Can you help

■ To donate money to supply the South Lake Tahoe Police Department with more bear aversion kits contact Officer Scott Willson at (530) 542-6100.

■ Or send money for aversion kits to the BEAR League. Contact the league by calling (530) 525-7297 or go to their Web site at www.savebears.org

and yelling "bad bear."

In the early 1990s, county deputies honked their horns and flipped on their lights and sirens to scare the bears. But bears learn quickly and that technique didn't work for long, said Sgt. Randy Peshon, of the El Dorado Sheriff's Department.

In 1999, the sheriff's department began carrying aversion kits in their patrol cars. Before the police adopted an aversion program, the sheriff's department responded to all bear calls in the county and the city. Deputies used aversion technique on 39 bears in 2000. In 2001, aversion was used 17 times. This year deputies have scared off 20 bears with rubber bullets.

"As more (rural) areas get their garbage locked up, we're starting to see the problem com-



Jim Grant/Tahoe Tribune

Ann Bryant, the executive director of the BEAR League, donates two bear aversion kits to South Lake Tahoe police officer Scott Willson on Wednesday.

ing into urban areas," Peshon said.

"Most of our calls we go out on are not aversions," he said. "We go out and say, 'Yep, that's a bear. Stay away from it and lock up your garbage.'"

Peshon said a bear aversion is only a short-term solution. Educating residents about bears and garbage, which the deputies take the time to do, is the real answer.

Clashes between humans and bears can get ugly. Last month, a bear was killed at Gardner Mountain, a neighborhood west of the "Y" that attracts a lot of bears. Someone shot and injured a bear. Police were called out to put the bear down, Willson said.

Last week, three bears were

killed at Spring Creek near cabins off Emerald Bay Road north of Camp Richardson. California Department of Fish and Game issued a permit to owners of a cabin ransacked by bears. The depredation permit allowed the couple to set a bear trap next to their cabin.

Trappers shot a mother bear near the cabin and later killed two cubs caught in the trap — a long metal tube that contained food. The cubs were killed because Fish and Game does not relocate bears.

A vigil for the dead bears is planned Sunday in front of the Shell station at the "Y" at 11 a.m. Call Frances at (530) 542-4927 or Anita at (530) 577-5934 for more information.