



## Bears on the prowl in Tahoe as winter hibernations wane

By Janet Vitt -- Bee Correspondent

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Tahoe's bears are up, out and hungry. And with this spring's deep, long-lasting snow cover, there's little natural food to be found.

Most of the food they're finding spells trouble - for the bears and for people.

The food is improperly secured garbage or food in homes and cars, said Ann Bryant, executive director of the BEAR League.

"I had hoped some would see (the deep snow) and go back to bed for a while," said Bryant, "but it's normal for them to be up this time of year, and if they find even a few bites of food, they're up for the duration."

The Tahoma-based nonprofit group has 1,400 volunteers who strive to help people live peacefully with the Tahoe basin's 600 bears.

The league is getting at least 15 calls a day, she said. Most are reports of sightings, but some involve bear break-ins. More than a dozen bears have broken into garages, houses and cars at last count, Bryant said.

Because they feasted last year on a good forest harvest - as well as garbage - the bears are emerging heavy and healthy this spring.

In general, Tahoe's black bears - which tend to be blond, cinnamon or brown more often than black - are by far the largest in the country, Bryant said.

Bears tend to grow bigger in northern latitudes, said California Department of Fish and Game spokesman Patrick Foy. And bears with access to human food consume a lot more calories than they would get from food in the wild, Foy said.

Until the tender greens and berries they need become available, the bears are going to get hungrier and thinner, but they're not going to starve, Bryant said. Some will find last year's pine cones or uncover some squirrel caches.

The morsels from garbage bins, cars, garages and homes are a different matter. Getting into houses can lead to depredation permits and the bear's death.

By law, Fish and Game has to issue depredation permits to an owner who proves property damage, who then can hire a hunter to kill the bear, said Steve Martarano, a department spokesman.

The league has received recent reports of four bears being shot in the south-shore area, one in Nevada and three in California, Bryant said. Two of those were reportedly without permits, she

said.

In the past week or so, Bryant said, bears have raided at least four houses in Squaw Valley, three in the Rubicon area on Tahoe's west shore and several in Meyers on the south shore.

"Thankfully, there was no damage in the Squaw and Rubicon houses - just a horrible mess," she said, adding that almost all the homes were unoccupied.

The exceptions were two homes in Squaw Valley: a newer one where the deadbolt had not been locked and another occupied by a man sleeping on the opposite side of the home from the kitchen.

"He didn't hear a thing, but got up in the morning to find paw prints in Bisquick powder on the floor," Bryant said.

At another home, "while mom raided the refrigerator, the cubs went upstairs, jumped on the beds and had a pillow fight," she said.

## **IF YOU ENCOUNTER A BEAR ...**

- \* Always use caution around bears. Never approach or feed them.
- \* Make noise while hiking and teach children to talk, sing or whistle as they hike or play outdoors.
- \* Never run away. Adults should pick up small children who might run. If the bear has a food cache, such as a berry bush or carrion, he may rear up to protect it. People have mistaken such an action as an attack and run. Instead, make brief eye contact - do not stare - and talk quietly as you back away slowly.
- \* The rules are different if the bear is on your property. Bears that begin to hang around in someone's yard should be chased away by yelling and throwing things so they know they don't belong there.

**- Barbara Barte Osborn**