

Bears vs. trash cans: The arms race continues

Some of Juneau's wilier bruins have figured out ways to defeat reinforced trash cans, Dumpsters

By Kate Golden | JUNEAU EMPIRE

Juneau's city-prowling black bears got peskier this year as some began to defeat reinforced trash cans and Dumpsters.

"The foundation of the issue is garbage," said Department of Fish and Game biologist Ryan Scott.

"It's been a long battle," said Matt Dull, operations manager for Arrow Refuse, the city's waste management company, who has provided bear-resistant - don't say bear-proof - cans to residents for the last six years.

In 2002, just after the city passed a strict, bear-preventive garbage ordinance, the Juneau Police Department got 114 calls about bears in Dumpsters.

By 2004, all the Dumpsters had newly required metal lids. That appeared to solve the Dumpster problem, according to data from Maria Gladziszewski, city special projects officer who has been tracking bear-related calls. From 2004 through 2007, police got between four and seven bear-in-Dumpster calls a year.

Bear-related calls of all kinds have more than halved since 2002, when police got 1,041 calls. About 40 percent of those were mere bear sightings, while the rest were about bears getting into trouble.

Gladziszewski said she isn't done compiling the 2008 numbers, but it's clear more people called about bears in Dumpsters, though not as many as in 2002.

Scott concurred. Whether more Dumpsters were overfilled and not closed properly, or whether the bears were more persistent, Scott said he didn't know.

"We're still scratching our heads trying to figure out where the breakdown in the Dumpster situation is," he said.

Last year, state biologists captured seven bears in Juneau. A sow and two cubs were collared and relocated in the Juneau area, as was a lone male. Three bears were sent to an animal holding facility at the University of Alaska Fairbanks for research.

This year, state biologists captured 12 bears, including five females and seven males, two of which were cubs. Six bears, including the two cubs, were relocated. Two were sent to Fairbanks.

A difference from the past two years is that four problem bears were killed this year.

State biologists don't kill bears at the scene. They capture them and then decide what to do. Generally, they relocate sows with cubs, while it depends whether lone males or females have a track record such as getting into trash.

Biologists also work with residents or businesses to remove whatever was attracting the bear in the first place. Otherwise, removing one bear just makes a hole for the next one, Scott said.

Dull of Arrow Refuse said he orders more bear-resistant trash cans each year, and each year he runs out.

About 900 of the 6,800 commercial and residential customers have bear cans, he said.

Dull considers the bear cans and the community's trash-handling a success in general.

But he also said the bears seem to be gaining on the cans: About 75 are still sitting in his warehouse waiting for a new lid.

He was surprised at all the damage this year. Some people needed their cans replaced three or four times. Arrow changed its policy: It no longer replaces damaged bear cans, Dull said.

"We could not afford to keep losing \$250 toters," he said.

He advised people to keep their garbage cans inside, wash them out each week, and do whatever's necessary to keep that alluring stink of garbage down.

"At some point, if a bear wants to get in there, he's going to get in there. People have to be proactive, and maybe get a little creative," Dull said.

Even without the lure of garbage, Scott said, "It should be said that the Juneau area is excellent black bear habitat."

Last week, the downtown Bullwinkle's Pizza Parlor Dumpster got another bear visit. Scott hoped it would be the finale of the 2008 bear season.

"We only have a few short months of quiet season, and then we're back into it," Scott said.

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