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Stop a bear from bingeing

Learn how at Carrabelle's black bear festival

By Kathleen Laufenberg
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

There's no better guide in black-bear habitat than Adam Warwick.

You remember Adam: the 32-year-old wildlife biologist who saved a drugged, drowning, 375-pound black bear from Alligator Harbor earlier this year. The photo and story of the incredible rescue went 'round the world via the Internet, CNN, CBS and Fox News.

Warwick and other bear experts will be leading short treks into Tate's Hell on Saturday to show hikers what bear habitat looks like and to talk about how bears and people can peacefully co-exist. It's all part of a new, daylong celebration in Carrabelle: the Forgotten Coast Black Bear Festival.

"We're getting a lot more bears around here and in the whole Panhandle area," Warwick said of the reason for the inaugural event. "This time of year, we see them around houses looking for acorns to eat, and they end up getting into garbage and trash."

Acorns are an excellent source of food for bears, but when they smell garbage (their sense of smell is greater than a bloodhound's), they can't resist a trashy binge. As the bears bulk up for colder weather, when food is less available, "they have to eat 20,000 calories a day," Warwick said.

He estimates there are about 3,000 bears in Florida now, far more since the state banned hunting them in 1994. The largest population of Florida black bears lives in the Ocala National Forest, but the Apalachicola National Forest area (Franklin, Wakulla, Liberty, Leon, Jefferson and Gadsden counties) also supports a bear community of about 600 to 800 individuals — the second largest bear population in the state.

"The center of the population is probably in Franklin and Wakulla counties," Warwick added.

During the Carrabelle festival, special bear-proof garbage bins will be given away, and residents with bear concerns will learn the best ways to keep these big mammals (males range from 250 to 450 pounds, females from 175 to 375) out of their yards. Recommendations include keeping dog food contained and inside your home; removing even empty food bowls from outside; taking down bird feeders. People with serious bear problems can resort to electric fencing around their garbage and recyclables, which is what beekeepers in the area do. It's a very effective deterrent, Warwick said.

The festival also will have live music, featuring the bands Swivel Kings, Shadetree and Celtic Music, said Lesley Cox, a festival coordinator. There will be several local authors on hand, including Doug Alderson and Faith Eidse, as well as bird-watching excursions, food, arts and crafts vendors, a special children's area and more.

"There's been a lot of interest in having this," said Suzanne Zimmerman, the executive director for the Carrabelle Chamber of Commerce.

As for those wondering if Warwick has any regrets about diving in to rescue that bear, the answer is no. Warwick said he was the one who darted the bear, and he couldn't just sit back and watch him drown.

"I don't think I could have lived with myself," he said. "I love animals, and I like bears especially."

The bear was relocated, but ended up scavenging in people's yards again, so he was finally placed in a wildlife sanctuary. Black bears are naturally shy and don't normally pose a danger to people — unless they become acclimated to them.

"Once a bear becomes accustomed to humans and realizes that he doesn't have to fear them, he may decide that it's OK to break into their house. Bears can be dangerous, but in general, they are not."

His famous bear rescue did leave him with a few lingering nicknames, Warwick said. Among his favorites: "the bear whisperer . . . the beast master and, oh, yeah, the hunky biologist. I liked that one pretty well."

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

What: Forgotten Coast Black Bear Festival.

When: Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Where: Carrabelle, at the Kendrick Sports complex off U.S. Highway 98.

Admission: Free.

More info: Carrabelle Chamber of Commerce, 850-697-2585, www.carrabellechamber.org.
