



# DEP NEWS RELEASE

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

Phil Murphy, Governor  
Sheila Oliver, Lt. Governor  
Catherine R. McCabe, Commissioner



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**Contact:** Caryn Shinske (609) 984-1795  
Lawrence Hajna (609) 292-2994

## **DEP OFFERS SAFETY REMINDERS FOR PUBLIC AS BEARS LEAVE WINTER DENS IN SEARCH OF FOOD**

**(19/P27) TRENTON** – The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection is reminding the public of important safety tips to follow as black bears begin emerging from winter dens and searching for food.



“It is especially important for residents who live in bear country to be aware of the common-sense steps they can take to reduce the chances of a bear coming onto their properties,” Commissioner Catherine R. McCabe said. “These reminders also are important for those who spend time outdoors or have a chance encounter with a bear.”

Black bears have been sighted in all of New Jersey’s 21 counties, but the population is densest in the northwestern counties of Sussex, Warren, Passaic and Morris.

Black bears are not true hibernators. They are emerging from their dens after a period of winter dormancy known as torpor, during which they may lose up to 20 percent of their body weight. They need to restore this weight for the mating season, which begins in late May and continues well into summer.

One of their primary natural food sources in spring is skunk cabbage, a leafy plant that grows along edges of rivers and streams and other wetlands. Grasses, forbs, tubers, bulbs and insects are other natural food sources. Bears may also feed on carrion.

Bears have an acute sense of smell and can detect scents across great distances, making it critical to prevent bears from being attracted to other food sources around properties, such as trash, food residue on grills, bird seed and pet food.

“Bears are by nature wary of people, however, animals attracted to neighborhoods may learn to associate people with food,” said Division of Fish and Wildlife Acting Director Dave Golden. “When bears make that connection they may become aggressive, cause property damage or seek handouts from people.”

**Intentional feeding of a bear is dangerous, illegal and carries a fine of up to \$1,000.**

The Division of Fish and Wildlife offers these tips to minimize encounters with bears:



- Secure trash and eliminate obvious sources of food, such as pet food, easy-to-reach bird feeders, or food residue in barbecue grills.
- Use certified bear-resistant garbage containers, if possible. Otherwise, store all garbage in containers with tight-fitting lids and place them along the inside walls of a garage, the basement, a sturdy shed or other secure area.
- Wash garbage containers frequently with a disinfectant solution to remove odors. Put out garbage on collection day, not the night before.
- Avoid feeding birds when bears are active. If you choose to feed birds, do so during daylight hours only and bring feeders indoors at night. Suspend birdfeeders from a free-hanging wire, making sure they are at least 10 feet off the ground. Clean up spilled seeds and shells daily.
- Remove all uneaten food and food bowls used by pets fed outdoors.
- Clean outdoor grills and utensils to remove food and grease residue. Store grills securely.
- Do not place meat or any sweet foods in compost piles.
- Remove fruit or nuts that fall from trees in your yard.
- Install electric fencing to protect crops, beehives and livestock.

If you encounter a black bear in your neighborhood or outdoors while hiking, fishing or camping, follow these tips:

- Remain calm and never run from a bear. Avoid direct eye contact, which a bear may perceive as a challenge. Back away slowly if a bear utters a series of huffs, makes popping sounds by snapping its jaws or swats the ground. Make sure the bear can easily escape.
- If a bear stands on its hind legs or moves closer, it may be trying to get a better view or detect scents in the air. This is usually not a threatening behavior.
- If a bear does not leave the area or advances toward you, make loud noises to scare it away by yelling, using a whistle, banging pots and pans or sounding an air horn. Make yourself look as big as possible by waving your arms. If you are with someone else, stand

close together with your arms raised above your heads. Move to a secure area, such as a vehicle or building.

- If hiking through bear country, always make your presence known by talking loudly or clapping hands.
- Families who live in areas frequented by black bears should have a “Bear Plan” in place for children, with an escape route and planned use of whistles and air horns.
- Black bear attacks on humans are rare. If a black bear does attack, fight back.

DEP wildlife experts emphasize that a black bear passing through an area and not causing a specific problem, such as breaking into trash or otherwise trying to access food sources on people’s properties or posing a safety threat, should be left alone.

People should leave the area and allow the bear to continue on its way. When frightened, bears may seek refuge by climbing trees. If the bear does go up a tree, clear the area and give the bear time to climb down and escape.

Report bear damage, nuisance behavior or aggressive bears to the Wildlife Control Unit of the DEP’s Division of Fish and Wildlife at (908) 735-8793. During evenings and weekends, residents should call their local police department or the DEP Hotline at 1-**877-WARN-DEP (1-877-927-6337)**.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife offers public education programs about how to safely coexist with black bears and minimize negative interactions with them. Presentations to school children, civic organizations, communities and other groups are available free of charge by calling biologist Michelle Smith at (609) 259-6961 or emailing [Michelle.Smith@dep.nj.gov](mailto:Michelle.Smith@dep.nj.gov).

To learn more about New Jersey’s black bears, visit [www.njfishandwildlife.com/bearfacts.htm](http://www.njfishandwildlife.com/bearfacts.htm).

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