

One of the best parts of living in Greater Minnesota is being able to take in the natural world all around us and the fascinating wild creatures that call our part of the state home. Eagles, deer, turkeys, waterfowl, and a host of other animals add to the charm of living in the areas distant from the state's tallest buildings. That charm can quickly turn to nuisance when the fascinating wild creatures come into conflict with people. As a recently returning resident to the Central Minnesota area, black bears are adapting rapidly to living here around people and, in some cases, outwearing their welcome. Today, I'd like to explore how people can better coexist with black bears.

Encountering a black bear can evoke many emotions, including for some, fear. However, black bears are typically not a threat to people or pets. Adam Stennett is the Minnesota DNR Conservation Officer assigned to the Sauk Rapids Station. CO Stennett has been a conservation officer for over 9 years in both Minnesota and Wisconsin. According to CO Stennett, "black bear interactions with people or pets are extremely rare. Bears are naturally cautious and do their best to avoid contact with humans. I lived in bear country for many years and I never worried about my pet or family being outside, even after we had a bear stroll past our house on our back patio." The Minnesota DNR website has a full page of advice for handling bear encounters in a variety of different circumstances at https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/livingwith_wildlife/bears/encounters.html. Generally, during bear encounters, people should ensure the bear knows of your presence and give the bear both space and an avenue of escape. In almost all cases, a bear will escape from the presence of people.

Most frequently, bears become a nuisance as they search for food. CO Stennett said "bears are opportunistic feeders and they eat many different things." Homes and businesses have many sources of food that can appeal to bears. CO Stennett stated "bird feeders are common, trash left outside in cans may attract a bear to the area. Grills and smokers would attract a bear as well." With a small amount of effort, bears can be convinced our homes are not their best option for food. According to CO Stennett "although bears do occasionally get into food sources around our homes, they much prefer their natural food sources."

Just as prevention is important for warding off crime, so too prevention is the key to avoiding conflict with bears. Central Minnesota is part of the black bear's traditional range and it is likely we will continue to see bear numbers grow here over time. In addition to a web page devoted to bear encounters, the Minnesota DNR has a web page devoted to information about living with bears. The web page may be found by visiting https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/livingwith_wildlife/bears/index.html. CO Stennett has the following advice for those looking to avoid bear conflicts, "we can remove the easy food sources especially when bears are most active. In spring and early summer, bears become very active and in search of food. Many times, natural food sources aren't available until mid-summer or like this dry summer, may be delayed which pushes bears into our neighborhoods where they can find those easy food sources we leave out."

For those who already have a bear making unwanted visits, CO Stennett has the following advice, "If a bear is getting into feeders, trash, etc., the first thing to do would be to remove the food sources. Next if you see the bear, from a safe distance, use an air horn, a whistle or other loud tool in an attempt to scare the bear away. Bears avoid people and if you make your yard an uncomfortable place to be, it will likely move on. If the issue continues, you can contact your local DNR wildlife manager or conservation officer and discuss options."

The presence of bears in natural habitat here is another one of things that makes our area a great place to live. With a small amount of preparedness, people can ensure their encounters with bears are positive. CO Stennett echoed this sentiment by saying, "to me, bears are a really awesome animal. I think it's great they're around! Remember, we are in bear country and we should expect to see them from time to time. If you see a bear, feel lucky and appreciate the natural resources we have in Benton County and hopefully it's an enjoyable experience." For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.