

Dumpster Bears

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AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS of covering additional districts due to officers being off for either family vacations or health issues, I can tell you things pile up quickly. For the last couple weeks of June I was covering most of McKean County and a portion of Potter County. Nuisance bear calls came in at a steady pace, both through the region office and my home. Bear traps were constantly being shifted, when either a bear had been caught or if enough time had passed without the bear returning. My neighboring officers were also being deluged with calls, yet they offered their culvert traps whenever possible.

During the third week of June I caught three bears that were transferred to either Clinton or Union counties. These bears were being used for programs at Camp Cadet programs — camps conducted for youngsters and primarily sponsored by the Pennsylvania State Police. Game Commission officers put on programs that may include processing bears and decoy usage, for example. I captured five other bears during this period.

The severity of the calls varies from a mere sighting of a bear to property damage, primarily to birdfeeders and garbage containers. The source of nuisance bear calls can almost always be linked to feeding, either by inadvertent feeding of bears through birdfeeders or careless management of garbage, to deliberate feeding by unknowing or uncaring people.

A major problem here in McKean County concerns garbage dumpsters; most dumpsters have plastic lids on them that offer little protection from bears. There are other dumpsters where people just don't seem to ever use the lids. If the dumpsters had steel lids with proper latches, and if the people would use them properly, bear complaints would dwindle. Proper fencing and, if possible, electric fencing would also be effective.

Two incidents demonstrating the link between improper use or care of dumpsters and bear calls occurred last June, although there were many more. The first was at the Redbridge Campground in the Allegheny National Forest. I received calls that the bears were coming into the dumpsters and the campsites, and that they were damaging camping equipment and breaking into vehicles. While I investigated the call, I learned that one couple was trapped in their vehicle when a female and her two cubs ravished their campsite. I also learned that people at several campsites had been feeding bears. I checked the dumpster and noted bear paw prints on the sides of it. I informed the campground stewards that I could not set a trap there because of the upcoming weekend. I knew that the campground would be full and I did not want to set the trap because of young children and pets.

Instead, I set the trap around 5 o'clock on Tuesday and then drove for 45 minutes to get home. I got there around 6:30 and as I ate dinner I got a call from the region office informing me that the female was in the trap and that two young bears were outside of the trap and that a crowd of people was gathering.

I immediately got back into uniform and headed back to the Redbridge Campground. As I approached the area, with dusk coming on, I proceeded directly to the trap where I saw the door was shut and two yearlings nearby. Before exiting my vehicle I loaded a 2cc tranquilizer dart and placed it into my dart gun, but as I approached the trap the two small bears headed up a nearby spruce tree. One stopped long enough for me to get a clear shot with the dart gun. The dart hit the bear in the hind leg and it climbed about 10 feet up the tree and stopped. Several minutes later the drug took effect and the bear slumped out of the tree, unharmed.

I turned my attention to the other young bear, but it was much too high for me to place a shot with the dart gun. I then tranquilized the female in the trap, I processed her in the trap, and after placing tags on the young bear I placed it in the trap with its mother.

At that moment the other bear darted out of the tree and ran off into the darkness. We tried to locate it, but he left the area. Being it was a yearling, I was certain it would survive. I also knew that it was probably just a matter of days before the female would have driven him off, anyway, because the breeding season was coming up. I then took the female and her remaining yearling to a remote area far removed from the campground and released them. If it had not been for the senseless feeding of these bears, it would not have been necessary to trap and relocate them. After all, they were living in the Allegheny National Forest, 500,000 acres of prime habitat. I returned home shortly after midnight.

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On June 22 I received a call from the Westline Inn concerning a bear, apparently a female with cubs that had become aggressive when an employee took trash from the restaurant to the dumpster. I talked to the owner of the inn and he filled me in on the details. I told him that I would return later in the day to set a trap.

Luckily, my neighboring officer Bill Ragosta was on vacation, so I figured his trap was probably sitting idle at a nearby State Game Lands building. I then proceeded to “borrow” Bill’s trap to set it up at the Westline.

Upon arrival at the inn I immediately noticed the dumpster’s plastic lids were open, and a trail of trash extended from it to a nearby drainage ditch and beyond. There was a fence around the area of the dumpster but no doors. I had no doubt that bears had been using the dumpster on a continual basis.

I talked to the owner and told him what improvements needed to be made to deter bears from using the dumpster. I then set the trap next to the dumpster, baiting it with doughnuts and other pastries. Before I left, I talked to a resident who told me I was fighting a losing battle. He stated that there were many bears in the area, including several females with three or four cubs. He went on to say that another female had three cubs and two yearlings with her. I told him that if there were that many bears in the area that someone must be feeding them, and that the problem would continue.

Like clockwork, I got a call at 7 a.m. informing me that I had captured a female with cubs nearby. I got dressed, grabbed my tranquilizer rifle and proceeded to Westline. Upon arrival I noted that the trap door was closed and that four cubs were in an aspen tree directly behind the trap. I immediately realized that I had quite a chore ahead of me, as the cubs were too young to be separated from their mom, so I had to either catch them all or turn the female loose. If I turned her loose, my only hope was that she would take the cubs away and not come back, but that was a pipe dream.

After talking to the Westline staff they put me in touch with John from the Lafayette Township Volunteer Fire Department. He agreed to come to the Westline Inn with a ladder truck to see if we could capture the cubs. In the meantime I tranquilized the female, and once she was under I opened the door, hoping the cubs would join her. The cubs were too smart for that trick, so when John arrived with the ladder truck all four cubs were still in the tree. It was apparent that the ladder truck wasn’t going to work, so John mentioned that he passed a utility truck with a cherry picker up the road. I immediately proceeded up the road and explained my dilemma and they immediately agreed to help. In preparation for the bucket truck, John cut down an old snag that was in front of the tree where the cubs were.

When the bucket truck arrived the cubs were as high in the tree as they could possibly be. I gave the bucket driver my snag pole and showed him how to use it. Using the hose from the fire truck the volunteer firemen aimed the water stream above the cubs forcing them lower and lower to the awaiting snare pole. The utility worker managed to snare one of the cubs and lowered him down to me. We wrapped the cub in a blanket and walked it over to the trap but it escaped before we could get it in and it ran off.

During the confusion another cub scurried down the tree and ran off in the direction of the first cub. I then decided to continue with the capture of the two remaining cubs, and after quite an effort by the utility crews, we were successful in capturing both cubs. Both cubs were placed inside the culvert trap with the female. The process took nearly an hour, and to our surprise, the two escaped cubs came back and went up a nearby tree. This time they went up a 50-foot spruce tree thick with branches and, of course, they went near the top.

The first thing we tried was to use the fire hoses to get the cubs to climb down within range of the tranquilizer rifle, but they were too smart for that trick again. It was then that I leaned over and asked the bucket driver if he was a good shot. He looked stunned but he said, “Yeah.”

I loaded up a practice dart and told him to shoot a knot in a tree about 15 yards away. He hit the mark dead on. I then told him where to place the shot. I loaded a dart in the rifle and he proceeded to go up in the bucket until he had a clean shot. After several tense moments he fired, hitting one cub perfectly. By the time he brought the bucket down so we could reload the rifle, the cub had succumbed to the effects of the drug. In fact he was wedged in a Y-branch and was hanging almost upside down. The bucket went up again and, once again, the dart hit its mark; that proved to be the easy part. Now we had to get the cubs down out of the tree safely.

We had enough volunteers to man blankets to catch the cubs as they came down. Their fall, I hoped, would be broken by the many branches of the tree. I then directed the bucket operator to go back up and use a long pole to knock the cubs out of the tree. We then placed the blanket brigade on the side of the tree where the cubs most likely would fall. I got on the other side to direct the operation.

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When everyone was ready the bucket operator knocked the first cub out of the tree. To my dismay, the cub somehow managed to fall through the only hole in the branches, and I was directly below it. I had a 35-pound cub careening toward me head over heels. The only thing I could do was to try and catch it, as the fall may have killed it.

I braced myself, and at the moment of impact I caught the bear, but its rear quarter caught me square in the shoulder and collar bone. I dropped the bear, but at least I had broken its fall and it landed unharmed. My shoulder, however, hurt for several days. The recovery of the second cub went off without a hitch, as the bucket operator knocked it out of the tree and it fell directly into the blanket. After placing tags in the ears of both cubs, we placed them in the culvert trap with the mother and the other two cubs.

It had been nearly four hours from the time I had arrived until the last cub had been placed in the culvert trap with its mom. Everyone was pleased with the effort we made to keep the female and her four cubs together, but I realized that nothing was going to change.

The restaurant would have to continue to use the dumpster, and unless they fixed the lids another bear would simply move in. The feces left in the trap by the female were full of corn, so it was evident that someone in the area was feeding the bears. I can't thank the members of the Lafayette Township Volunteer Fire Department enough for their time and help. Thanks also goes out to the utility company for their time and for the use of the bucket truck. Without them, I don't know how things would have turned out. One of the guys from the bucket truck told me as I was ready to leave that it was his best day at work ever. I was glad to share the experience. As for the female and cubs they were released in a remote area far from any restaurants and dumpsters.