

Reducing Human-Bear Conflicts: Bear-Resistant Trash Cans¹

Ethan T. Noel, Elizabeth F. Pienaar, and Mike Orlando²

Living with the Florida Black Bear

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is a unique subspecies of the American black bear. It is the only species of bear found in Florida (Giuliano et al. 2014). In 2017, biologists in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) estimated that there were approximately 4,030 black bears in Florida.

Black bears will travel long distances to find food. An adult black bear may eat up to 20,000 calories per day, which is about the calorie content of 38 Big Mac sandwiches. Bears use their excellent sense of smell to locate food. They can smell food from about a mile away. Because they need so much food to survive, black bears will congregate at abundant food sources. One of the highest-calorie food sources available to a bear is human garbage. It is much easier for a bear to obtain its daily calorie requirement from eating garbage than to scavenge all day for acorns, nuts, berries, insects, and meat (e.g. opossums, armadillos, and carrion). This means that black bears' diets can shift from natural foods to highly processed human foods and trash.

Bears' increasing reliance on human sources of food is placing the Florida black bear at risk. Bears are eating foods (and other items in garbage, e.g. plastic) that are not healthy for them. They are also losing their natural fear of humans, which puts bears at risk of being killed. If bears lose their fear of humans because they have become reliant on garbage and other human food sources, then they may be



Figure 1. Black bears can easily tear apart unsecured garbage cans. Credits: myfwc.com/bear

considered a risk to human safety. A bear that is considered a risk to human safety will be shot to prevent human injury.

Food-Conditioning of Bears

Access to garbage may cause bears to associate people with food, putting both people and bears at risk. Herrerro and Higgins (2003) found a clear relationship between the presence of garbage and increased bear attacks on people.

Bears that become “food-conditioned” (i.e. reliant on garbage, pet food, and bird seed for food) lose their natural fear of humans. These bears are more likely to be killed as a result of vehicle collisions, illegal shooting, or euthanasia to prevent risks to human safety.

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2. Ethan T. Noel, Masters graduate student, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation; Elizabeth F. Pienaar, assistant professor and Extension specialist – Human Dimensions of Wildlife, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611; and Mike Orlando, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Feeding bears is illegal in Florida—even when it is done unintentionally—and it could result in a fine. This document presents several ways to make garbage inaccessible to bears to prevent them from staying in residential areas, where they are a risk to people and people are a risk to them.

Bear-Resistant Trash Cans

Prevent bears from accessing garbage with a bear-resistant trash can specially designed to thwart bear forays. Bear-resistant trash cans come in a variety of sizes, including 32-gallon cans, 64-gallon cans, and 96-gallon cans. They look just like standard trash containers with wheels (polycarts), but bear-resistant cans have a special locking mechanism on the lid. People can easily open the lock, but bears cannot. Because bears are very strong, these cans are often reinforced with metal throughout the lid and body of the can, which stops bears from destroying the can to access the trash inside. The locking mechanisms on the trash-container lids range from simple latches to more complicated locks that require two hands to operate.

Choosing a Bear-Resistant Trash Can

Before you invest in a bear-resistant trash can, check with your local county or city government and your waste service provider to see if they have any restrictions on the types of cans that they will empty as part of your trash collection service. (Some types of bear-resistant cans may be incompatible with your waste service provider's garbage-collection trucks.)

If the waste service provider does allow the use of bear-resistant trash cans, they may provide them to people on request (usually at additional cost). If your waste service provider does not offer the cans but does permit their use, there are several models of bear-resistant trash cans available in Florida and other states where bears are found. These cans are available for order online.

Follow your waste service provider's instructions to make the right selection. If your waste service is manual (the garbage-truck driver or another person handles the cans and empties the garbage into the truck), you can purchase bear-resistant trash cans with lids that lock automatically or manually or that have screw-on lids. If your waste service is fully automated (a mechanical arm picks up curbside trash without a person exiting the truck) look for bear-resistant cans that are specifically designed for fully automated waste pick-up. Again, check with the provider first to make sure you choose the right model.



Figure 2. A bear-resistant trash can with automatic locking lid by BearSaver

Bear-Resistant Caddies

Another option for securing garbage from bears is to use a bear-resistant caddy to store your trash can until the day of pick-up. Caddies are wooden or metal sheds that keep your garbage can secured from bears and other wildlife until it is ready for pick-up. You can build the caddy yourself using one of the design plans provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Choose from three plans: two cans, single can – slatted, and single can – enclosed.

You can find these plans at: <http://myfwc.com/wildlife-habitats/managed/bear/living/attractants/>. Alternatively, you can purchase a pre-made bear-resistant caddy from a manufacturer. See below for potential manufacturers.



Figure 3. A bear-resistant caddy designed to secure garbage cans before pick-up.
Credits: FWC

Use It!

Acquiring a bear-resistant can or caddy is a great first step towards reducing bears' access to garbage. However, bear-resistant cans and caddies are only effective when used properly and consistently. An unlatched bear-resistant can is not bear-resistant at all!

Bear-Resistant Trash Can Manufacturers

With automatic lids **and** designed for fully automated waste pick-up

- Kodiak Products:
928-636-9298
<http://www.kodiak-products.com/>

With automatic locking lids

- Toter, Inc.
1-800-424-0422
<http://www.toter.com/>
- BearSaver
1-800-851-3887
<http://www.bearsaver.com/>
- BearProof, Inc.
970-309-2460
<http://www.bearproofinc.com/>

Without automatic locking lids

- The Growler
407-519-0766
<http://www.thegrowlercan.com/>
- BEARicuda Bins
1-877-232-7428
<http://www.bearicuda.com/>

With screw-on lids

- DAWG, Inc.
1-800-935-3294
<http://www.dawginc.com/>
- BEARicuda Bins
1-877-232-7428
<http://www.bearicuda.com/>

Bear-Resistant Caddy Manufacturers

- BearGuard
530-581-2211
<http://www.bearguardinfo.com/>
- Haul-All Equipment Ltd.
1-888-428-5255
<http://www.haulall.com/contain.htm>
- Smoky Metal Works
965-908-4248
<http://www.smokymetalworks.com/>

More Information

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw396>—UF/IFAS extension document providing information on living with bears in Florida

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw389>—UF/IFAS extension document providing information on human-bear conflicts in Florida

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw250>—UF/IFAS extension document providing information on dealing with nuisance bears in Florida

<http://myfwc.com/bear>—Information on bear ecology and conservation provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

References

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2014. *A guide to living in bear country* [Brochure].

Herrerro, S., and A. Higgins. 2003. "Human Injuries Inflicted by Bears in Alberta: 1960–90." *Ursus* 14(1), 44–54.