UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

WEC385

Securing Bird Feeders from Florida Black Bears[1]

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Figure 1. Bears will go to great lengths to access bird feeders. Credits: FWC

Seeds of Conflict

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is the only species of bear in Florida, with an estimated population of approximately 4,030 bears. Unfortunately, Florida's growing populations of people and bears have resulted in increased conflicts between people and bears. New residential developments in bear habitat, or on the border of bear habitat, have provided bears with new, unnatural food sources (Giuliano et al. 2014; Pienaar 2014). Bears that become reliant on these human food sources are "food conditioned." Food-conditioned bears often lose their natural fear of humans. Bears that have lost their fear of humans are at greater risk of being killed from vehicle collisions, illegal shooting, or euthanasia. A bear that is considered a risk to human safety will be shot.

Bird seed is a major food attractant to bears. Bears are omnivores, meaning that they will eat anything edible, including bird seed. Bears are excellent climbers and can access bird feeders that are suspended from trees. It is important to secure bird seed from bears so that they don't become food conditioned.

Remember: feeding bears in Florida, even unintentionally, is illegal and could result in fines or prosecution if you continue to feed bears after receiving a written warning from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (http://myfwc.com/news/resources/fact-sheets/feeding-rules-and-penalties/; http://myfwc.com/media/1327650/68A-4-001.pdf). This document will go over a few ways to make bird feeders less accessible to bears.

Bird Feeder Placement

Feeder placement is important: feeders must be placed out of the reach of bears. Secure bird feeders at least 10 feet off the ground and 4 feet from any attachment points. Feeders can be secured on the top of poles or suspended from cable systems.

Catch Pans

Place a catch pan under your bird feeder. A catch pan is a plastic or metal dish suspended beneath a bird feeder to prevent seeds from scattering on the ground. This pan is used to capture waste seed (or seed that the birds scatter while they are eating) and prevent it falling on the ground

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so that you do not attract bears into your backyard. Catch pans can be purchased at feed stores, garden-supply stores, superstores, or online. Catch pans can be mounted on a bird-feeder pole or can hang from the bird feeder.

Figure 2. Left picture: Bird feeder poles are an effective method of making bird feeders inaccessible to bears; Right picture: example of a cable-suspension system.
Credits: Left picture: Ethan Noel, UF/IFAS; Right picture: myfwc.com/bear

Figure 3. Bird feeder with catch pan.
Credits: Ethan Noel, UF/IFAS

Shelled Seed

Shelled seed (e.g. sunflower, safflower, canary seed) should be put in bird feeders because shells from seeds will also attract bears into your backyard. Shelled seeds have had their hard outer casings (e.g. shells, hulls) removed so that all that is left is the edible seed itself. Shelled seed can be purchased at feed stores, garden supply stores, superstores, or online.

Figure 4. Shelled bird seed does not result in leftover hulls or uneaten pieces.
Credits: Ethan Noel, UF/IFAS

Other Tips

- Only put a single day's worth of feed out at one time. This amount can vary depending on the number of birds that visit your feeder in a given day. Try to estimate daily usage to the best of your ability.
- Bring bird feeders that are not bear-proof inside at night so that they don't attract bears. Bears prefer to move about at night (although they will also eat seed during the day) so don't leave out an unattended bird feeder.
- Consider removing bird feeders altogether. Bird baths and other water sources are good ways to entice birds to visit your yard/garden without attracting bears.

More Information

Bear Proof Birds Only Feeder. (n.d.). Retrieved July 28, 2016, from http://wisconsinblackbears.com/

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Giuliano, W. M., H. K. Ober, L. Watine, E. Hellgren, R. Boughton, and D. Telesco. 2014. *Managing Conflicts with Wildlife: Living with Bears*. WEC351. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw396