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Bear necessities

Campaign aims to keep tenderfoot explorers safe and aware where the wild things are

Please bring extra food for the bears when you go hiking," reads the flier "New Mexico Hikers United for Hungry Bears," which was distributed at a New Mexico park.

"Leave the food by the stream or hidden places (not near the road or the trail)," is the stunning message in the plea for "starving" bears in a low-food year. "They love apples, bananas, melons, pears, fruits without pits. They love goodies too."

To Montanans who grew up in bear country, this goes beyond stunning. It is ludicrous.

But to visitors and new residents looking for wilderness experiences, Chuck Bartlebaugh fears it may make all too much sense.

That's why Bartlebaugh, founder and director of the Center for Wildlife Information in Missoula, is teaming up with the Boy Scouts of America, schoolchildren, government agencies, backcountry enthusiasts and wildlife advocates across the nation on the Be Bear Aware and Wildlife Stewardship Campaign.

Bartlebaugh is passionate about getting accurate information to visitors from every part of the country — long before the visitor ever drives through a national park entrance station or sets foot on national or state forest land.

"We have at least 9 million guests in Montana every year," Bartlebaugh said.

The sheer number of staffers from government resource-management agencies needed to educate the 9 million people who visit Montana every year about appropriate behavior around wildlife makes that option impractical, he said. A well-informed community that is willing to pass along essential knowledge is the only reasonable option.

Bartlebaugh also teamed up with Boy Scouts District Executive Jim Atkinson of Kalispell, who is equally passionate about this education effort as he works with his troop leaders and Scouts.

"Once you pay the fee and go into the park, you're in their territory," he said of bears.

"You're part of the food chain," Bartlebaugh agreed.

So all of Atkinson's Scouts memorize the three R's — respect, responsibility and reality. It's important to ask the right questions, he said, and carry a healthy dose of common sense and awareness of your surroundings.

Bartlebaugh has his own marketing plan to foster that awareness: Everyone, everywhere. Inner-city youths from New York City who just might be making trips to the Rockies someday need this education just as much as the kid growing up in Kila.

"Every day, Montana kids go out riding on their bikes, hiking in bear and cougar country, and they're not hurt," Bartlebaugh said.

"Injuries come (with) out-of-state visitors. Maulings of Montana people usually have something to do with windy, rainy days. But maulings of visitors happen on any kind of day."

Bartlebaugh tapped into the youngsters' homegrown common sense more than a decade ago when he worked with Columbia Falls Junior High students and then-principal Neal Wedum to catalog their tips for enjoying wildlife safely and responsibly.

Nine students formed the school's Wildlife Stewardship Team and came up with a starting packet. Samplings from that packet:

-Common Sense — Do not leave food garbage in outside cans, haul it to the dump soon; pick ripe fruit and string electric fence around trees; pet food goes in bear-proof cans or inside the house.

-Camping — Hang food 10 feet off the ground and four feet away from the supporting trunks; leash pets;

especially with garbage, pack it in/pack it out; keep at least 150 yards between you and a bear; leave soap, deodorant, shampoo and the like at home.

-Hiking — Make noise, hike in groups and during the day, carry bear spray; let someone know your routes and return times; control pets and children; learn to identify tracks and bear signs; avoid ripe berries, dead animals and fish-filled rivers.

They also got specific about bear behavior and proper human reactions. Bears on their hind feet are checking out the situation, not being aggressive. If you have an encounter, stay calm, don't look directly into the bear's eyes, back away and climb at least 10 feet into a sturdy tree, never run, and "if the bear is mauling you, punch it's lights out!"

And remember, the junior-high team added, a fed bear is a dead bear.

Wedum, now semi-retired and working as a junior high and high school principal in Choteau, remembered Bartlebaugh's hunch that city youths were more likely to listen to Columbia Falls youths than to adults when it came to learning the bear-country ropes.

"Kids in Chicago, New York, Washington, D.C., who have seen these TV shows of people doing stupid things with bears that are all wrong, people running from bears," need to have some context, Wedum said. "Kids here see things like that and say 'That's a really stupid commercial, we don't run from bears.' but city kids think it's funny, that it makes sense."

He was impressed with what his students produced after working with Bartlebaugh.

"I think kids from Columbia Falls as a group don't even realize that is part of their natural instinct. They just say, 'I've been told this, heard it, seen this is what to do. And they would know what to do,'" Wedum said. "And kids listen to kids better than to adults."

Today, their foundational work has grown into the primary educational tool used across the nation in the form of professional-quality, student-produced information packets used to train teachers, Scout leaders and other group leaders going to bear country.

They include photos and descriptions of black, grizzly, coastal brown and polar bears. There are guides on hiking and camping in bear country and wildlife stewardship. Discussions on wildlife ethics are included, as is a precaution on carrying bear spray.

Boy Scouts from the Flathead spent a day at Grizzly Base Camp three weeks ago, not only going over the exhaustive information but getting their hands on real-life campsites, food storage, bear signs and more. When each Scout teaches two other groups, he will receive his Be Bear Aware trainer patch.

Likewise, groups across the country are using the packet to prepare for trips to bear country.

In the process, the Be Bear Aware Campaign garnered national praise.

Retired Army Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf signed on as its national spokesman.

U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, the former regional chief in Western Montana and chairman of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, commended the work in a personal letter to Bartlebaugh.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., entered the budding program into the Nov. 17, 1995, Congressional Record.

More awards and recognition over the years have come from President George H.W. Bush, the Arizona and New Mexico Fish and Game agencies, the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee and others.

All that is fine with Bartlebaugh, but he's mostly concerned with the bottom line.

"When you come here for a program, you have an obligation to start by talking about safety and respect for wildlife," he said. "All instructors have got to start with safety and the interrelationship of all wildlife."

Reporter Nancy Kimball can be reached at 758-4483 or by e-mail at nkimball@dailyinterlake.com.