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DEM expert hosts informational lecture on local bears

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Many South County residents were surprised by bear encounters last spring, like the young black bear that peaked through the window of a woman's car in Narragansett. Mary Gannon, wildlife outreach program coordinator at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's Fish & Wildlife Division hopes to get Rhode Islanders comfortable with seeing them.

File photo

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NARRAGANSETT – Mary Gannon, wildlife outreach program coordinator at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management’s Fish & Wildlife Division, describes one of her goals in the job as “getting the whole state comfortable with bears.” In that mission, Gannon will host an informational lecture on local bears and their history on Sunday, Feb. 23 at the Maury Loontjens Memorial Library as part of the ongoing and annual “On Pettaquamscutt Winter Speaker Series.”

“The presence of bears in Rhode Island is no cause for panic,” she shared in an interview. “They are a natural and important part of our native ecosystem, and it’s good that they are back. It is perfectly possible to coexist with these beautiful creatures, but it’s our responsibility to alter our habits in response to bears on the landscape. The bears are just doing what is natural to them, so we have to do our part to help keep the balance and be good stewards.”

The local presence of bears took on increased scrutiny last year when a large black bear approached a woman tending a property near Camp Varnum in Narragansett. From the safety of her car, the South Kingstown resident snapped a close-up of the bear, and the photograph was shared thousands of times on various social media platforms and made headlines across the country.

“I spoke to the woman who took the photo, and she said that the bear was very interested in the snacks on her passenger seat, a peach and some crackers,” said Gannon. “She said that while he was intimidating because of his size, he was generally just curious and not aggressive. While obviously a little shaken by the encounter, she also expressed a lot of positive sentiment toward the bear. My guess is that particular bear may have gotten a little bold because it had been snacking in backyards and grown to associate people with food.”

“I love that photo, not only because the bear is absolutely beautiful, but because it perfectly illustrates what can happen if we don’t work as a community to remove bear attractants and benignly haze bears,” Gannon added.

The wildlife outreach program coordinator also believes black bears, which are native to New England, were fairly common to Rhode Island prior to the arrival of European settlers. The settlers’ conversion of vast forest to farmland, combined with their affinity for hunting big-game animals, for both sport and livestock protection, likely drove the state’s black bear population away.

“Once the settlers got here, most of the state’s forested habitat was cleared for farming,” said Gannon. “The settlers were also notorious for killing anything with sharp teeth out of fear for their livestock, and also for hunting with the misconception that our wildlife resources are endless. All of these factors combined caused the black bear to disappear from Rhode Island’s landscape by the year 1800. Now that our forests have regenerated across the region, bears have been able to make a comeback. Bear population growth in Connecticut and Massachusetts has resulted in bears trickling back into Rhode Island. If you live in Chepachet or Foster, bear sightings are probably not that new to you. However, if you live in the suburbs of Johnston and Cranston, spotting a bear bumbling through your neighborhood is pretty new and exciting, depending on your attitude towards bears.”

Gannon shares that some easy steps to better co-exist with bears include, most importantly, managing one’s bird feeders during the spring, summer and fall months. While they can be naturally intimidating due to their size, claws and teeth, black bears are generally not aggressive and can be scared away easily.

“A mother bear with cubs could potentially charge, but she’s just trying to protect them,” said Gannon. “Most bears can be scared away by loud noises and shouting. Bears that are intentionally fed or have come to associate people with food are usually the bears that don’t show fear towards humans. This is where it can get tricky and potentially dangerous for both people and bears. The best thing we can do is to work together to keep bears wild by removing human-placed food sources and ‘hazing’ bears with loud noises to keep them wary of people.”

Further, black bears are omnivores, meaning they eat both plants and meat, though the species seems to favor the vegetative side of nourishment.

“Bears love seeds (and fruit and fatty foods), so putting out bird feeders is like a friendly invitation for a bear to come have lunch on your back deck,” she said. “I recommend removing your bird feeders from March through November. Worried about your birds? Food is plentiful for birds during the spring, summer and fall, so they will be just fine foraging on their own. If you love seeing birds in your backyard, consider planting some native fruiting shrubs and wildflowers to provide natural food sources and shelter. Your feathered friends will thank you.”

Securing gardens, compost piles and chicken coops are also good steps to deter bears, according to Gannon.

“My suggestion is to take a good look at your yard and think like a bear,” she said. “This could be a fun activity to do with your kids and grandkids. ‘Hmm...could I eat that? That bird seed bucket looks pretty easy to break into. Oh, stinky compost!’ After your yard inspection, remove anything that might even remotely attract a bear.”

To hear Gannon’s full presentation of the re-emergence of the Rhode Island black bear, attend the “On Pettaquamscutt Winter Speaker Series” at Maury Loontjens Memorial Library on Sunday, Feb. 23. The program, titled “The Rhode Island Bear Story,” goes from 1 to 3 p.m. The event is free and open to the public, though registration to attend is required at onpettaquamscutt.org.

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