

Expert says people can live alongside grizzly bears in the foothills

BY COLETTE DERWORIZ, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 28, 2014 12:57 PM



A grizzly bear on ranchland near Millarville. Rancher Gary Akins says he's had 10 calves killed and another three seriously injured by grizzly bear activity in the area.

Photograph by: Photos courtesy Gary Akins

As landowners and ranchers express fears about a growing number of grizzly bears in the foothills, a prominent biologist and conservationist says there's no need to make a choice between bears and people.

Last week, the province met with dozens of residents in the Millarville area about a growing number of bear sightings in the area. Many said they felt threatened by the bears coming into their yards or preying on their cattle.

"People need to be realistic about the fact that they are living in bear country," said Kevin Van Tighem, a retired Banff National Park superintendent who wrote a book called *Bears Without Fear*. "You can't just assume that the issues around bears are going to go away.

“Denial is no more helpful than fear.”

The latest tally showed there were about 100 bears in the area between Highway 1 and Highway 3 along the Rockies, but it's expected the population has grown in the years since 2006 when the initial count took place.

It also found there are only 700 bears across Alberta — a number that resulted in the species being declared threatened and led to a recovery strategy aimed at reducing conflicts between bears and people, improving knowledge about the animals and decreasing human-caused mortality.

Three bears have been relocated or killed in the foothills so far this year, but no one has been injured in the vicinity. Ranchers say they are losing cattle to bears, although it's unknown whether some of the cows or calves died before being fed on by the bears.

Officials with the province laid out some tips for protecting their cattle and themselves at the meeting.

Van Tighem agreed people in the area need to take a good look at the bear attractants and deal with those issues.

“There's ways you can do that,” he said. “There are bear-proof storage systems available. There's certainly electric fencing, which is cheap and affordable and effective. “If you don't want bears around where you live, you have to look at what you've got in terms of food attractants and figure out how to keep bears out.”

Similar efforts in southern Alberta have worked to reduce conflicts between landowners and bears.

It includes removing attractants such as animal carcasses, installing bear-proof doors and steel or concrete floors on grain bins and putting electric fencing around livestock pens or silage piles.

Van Tighem said people should also be carrying bear spray when they are out on the landscape.

“People need to manage their fears and use their heads — lots of folks who live among bears already are doing that,” he said. “Decisions based on fear almost always turn out wrong.

“There is no need to make a choice between people and bears; we can choose for both and make it work.”

Van Tighem added it's important for people to take some time to learn about what's known about bears.

“If you are seeing bears all of the time, you can be scared or you can be conscious of the fact that you are seeing them and nothing has happened,” he said. “Bears are not dangerous 99 per cent of the time.

“They can become dangerous if we make them scared of us or if we come between them and a food source, but intrinsically they are no more dangerous than deer.”

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