

## BEAR ALERT

It is spring, and wildlife, like humans, are out and moving about. We should all be vigilant and wise in our encounters with wild creatures. Although they may look cute and cuddly, wild creatures are not our friends and certainly not our pets.

A recent event illustrates the problem of humans interacting with wild animals. The wildlife officer who worked with Highlands in implementing our BearWise program was on NBC Nightly News this past weekend, addressing the dangerous situation that occurred in Asheville.

A group of people saw several very young bear cubs in a tree. Instead of just leaving the cubs alone, these folks took them out of the tree to take photographs with them. That action was irresponsible on two fronts. Young cubs in the wild do not need to be held by humans. They can live and survive with their mother bear, provider, and defender. Second, it was fortunate for those reckless humans that the cubs' mother was not in the area. If she had been, those folks could have been seriously injured or even killed. And if that had been the tragic case, no one could have blamed the mother bear; she would have been doing what she instinctively does to protect her young.

If anyone sees someone interacting with wildlife like this incident, please call 911 so law enforcement and wildlife officials can intervene to protect both the animals and the people involved.

We have had a BearWise program in place in Highlands for several years. In fact, we were the first community in the region to adopt the programs and its bear protocols. Without BearWise, I can't imagine what our garbage and sanitation situation would be at this time. While the town still has breaches of bear-resistant containers, the program has successfully curbed bears from coming through the town and eating the garbage we generate.

Very soon, the town will pass an ordinance requiring restaurants to secure large tanks that contain several hundred gallons of grease. This past week, bears turned over two grease tanks at a local shopping center. Our fire department had to go into hazmat mode to prevent the grease from running into a stream that flows into our drinking water system. The new ordinance will require these tanks to be secured in such a manner that large bears can not turn them over.

Let me also remind folks to keep a safe distance from any bear you may encounter. While large bears appear to be slow and lumbering, they can charge a person with amazing speed. If you are looking to take a photo of a cute bear, and you are 30 feet away from the bear, and if that animal charges, there is a high likelihood that your escape would not be possible. Everyone is encouraged this time of year not to put out bird feeders or at least take the feeders inside at night. Bears love seeds; they are a magnet to hungry bears.

If a homeowner is having trouble with bear interactions on their property, please call the Highlands Police Department at (828) 526-9431. The department has a code enforcement officer who can assist in addressing the problem. The town website also has a link to BearWise information.