

Virginia's First



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Wintergreen residents choose proactive measures to coexist with black bears.

by Jaime L. Sajecki

Wintergreen Resort, a residential and vacation community nestled against the Blue Ridge Parkway in Nelson County, is a place where it is sometimes hard to tell where the forest ends and the real estate begins, especially if you are a bear. Prompted by a series of break-ins by bears to resort homes in 2007 and the removal or euthanasia of nine bears over two years, Wintergreen residents decided to take action to make theirs a community where both people and bears could coexist.

Wintergreen Property Owners Association staff and Wintergreen

police began cooperating with Department (DGIF) biologists and law enforcement officers on measures to curtail the bear-related problems occurring at the resort. Public refuse facilities were secured and homeowners were advised on managing trash and bird feeders. And to increase bear awareness by residents and visitors, the Wintergreen Nature Foundation hosted a seminar given by DGIF on black bears, with focus on preventing further negative interactions.

Fueled by a strong desire to prevent future conflicts, Wintergreen residents Sarah and Robert Scott founded the Wintergreen Bear Smart program. After reading about the Bear Smart effort in British Columbia in the book *Living with Bears: A Practical Guide to Bear Country* by Linda Masterson, the Scotts decided to start their own Bear Smart community.

The Wintergreen Bear Smart program is governed by a seven-person

council, made up of full-time residents. The council assessed the conditions that were contributing to the habituation of bears to people such as bird feeding and unsecured garbage. Another important task was to gain the cooperation of other Wintergreen community organizations to support the new Bear Smart program.

The success that the Bear Smart program has experienced can be seen in the numbers. Since 2007, the number of bear incidents has dropped by over 80%, and those resulting in damage to homes or property have decreased by over 90%. In 2009, a few bears were seen and at least one window screen was damaged, but harassment by Wintergreen police proved effective. No traps were set and no bears were euthanized.

So, how did this community begin their road to successful and harmonious coexistence of humans and bears? To begin the process, concerned Wintergreen residents met

Bear Smart Community

with the local DGIF district wildlife biologist to discuss the Bear Smart program. Then, by following Bear Smart guidelines, they established the Bear Smart Council and met with each of the various boards at Wintergreen to explain the program and solicit cooperation. From these meetings, the council received full commitment from the various boards, including the Wintergreen Property Owners Association Board, which had already begun to minimize conflicts at trash disposal sites. The next step focused on media outreach and programs for local groups to promote community-wide efforts.

Another major step occurred when the property owners association passed resolutions requiring homeowners to stop feeding birds between April 1 and December 1 and banned outside garbage cans unless they were bear-proof. The council requested that the association purchase bear-proof containers for public-use areas, in addition to the large compactors already on-site.

Other proactive measures taken by the Wintergreen community included record-keeping by Wintergreen police on bear incidents and sightings, and immediate response by the police department to all bear incidents. The Wintergreen Property Owners Association agreed to pay for and put up signs, as well as post information on their Web site concerning bear activity in the area. Wintergreen Partners, Inc. provided garbage management and bear literature to arriving resort guests. They also show the Department's DVD, *Living with Black Bears in Virginia*, on the in-house TV. In addition to no longer selling bird food from April to December, the Wintergreen Nature Foundation published a special brochure on black bears that includes precautions when encoun-

tering bears in the wild and around homes. The foundation also has the black bears DVD available for viewing by visitors.

When asked to provide advice for communities that might want to start a Bear Smart program of their own, the Scotts offer the following tips:

- It must be a citizens' effort to engage the various entities who have a stake in managing the bear problem in the community.
- The education of community members regarding the habituation of bears is essential.
- It is important to not assign blame for the problem to various people or agencies and, rather, just deal with the facts on what is happening and what would solve the problem.

Also, an assessment of community conditions (found at <http://www.bearsmart.com/becoming-bear-smart/community/bear-hazard-assessments>) was reported along with recommendations to each community entity.

What does the future hold for human-bear relationships on this 11,000-acre community on the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains? The Bear Smart Council pledges to continue to educate the community regarding program progress and bring awareness to continuing problems. The Wintergreen Property Owners Association will continue to send out letters to residents yearly reminding them of their responsibilities, enforce bird feeding and trash regulations, and keep DGIF up-to-date on non-compliance or illegal feeding activities. The Department will continue to support this program and community by providing education and enforcement as needed.

The Bear Smart Council, residents, and all Wintergreen entities understand that the Bear Smart program will be an ongoing effort with continuing challenges due to the constant influx of new residents and guests. However, they feel that the reward—being able to live in a community surrounded by the beauty of the natural world and associated wildlife, with little to no conflict—is worth the challenge.

All residents of Virginia living in bear country can benefit from following a few simple guidelines to reduce bear attractants around their homes. View tips and guidelines by watching the video, *Living with Black Bears in Virginia*, on the DGIF Web site (www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/). To learn about becoming a Bear Smart Community, first contact this Department for site-specific assistance and recommendations, and visit the Get Bear Smart Society Web site: www.bearsmart.com. □

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