

Bears of last summer will be back shortly

ATTACKS: City in need of plan to deal with aggressive bruins and residents.

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With Anchorage frozen into the cold, dark heart of an Alaska winter, the summer of the bears seems somehow far away and long ago. Yet the bears will return, warns Holly Kent, director of the Anchorage Waterways Council, and with them the problems of last year unless local residents start now to address bear issues.

Few here through the warm months of '08 will forget the summer the bears attacked.

A man strolling home along Meadow Creek in the bedroom community of Eagle River was injured after he got in a fistfight with a grizzly. A mountain biker and later a runner were seriously mauled in Far North Bicentennial Park, a finger of land between the urban edge and the suburban comfort of Anchorage proper.

Never before had bear attacks taken place so close to where most residents live and play. Bearanoia soon reigned.

Bicentennial Park -- once one of the city's most popular areas for wildland hiking, running and mountain biking -- was deserted. The city closed the park's popular mountain-biking trail along Campbell Creek. The Anchorage School District advised local coaches not to let cross-country running teams venture into the park. Average recreationists just simply stayed away.

"I was really shocked at how people abandoned the park," said John Weddleton, a community activist and a member of Friends of Bicentennial Park.

He was among a handful who kept using the park's trails, but even Weddleton admitted his use changed.

"I still biked and ran there, but not as much with the kids, and I had my (bear) spray in my quick-draw holster," he said. "Seems like I saw more scat on the Spencer Loop and the Gasline (trails) than I ever had before. I believe that when the humans left, the bears roamed more freely. So our reaction made the situation worse."

Biologists with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game are skeptical about that. They say it is just as likely that people saw more sign of bears because they were, in their heightened state of awareness, more alert for sign of bears.

There have long been, they add, a lot of bears along the park's Campbell Creek. A three-year study by research biologist Sean Farley identified at least 20 individuals, and Farley knows he didn't count them all.

BEAR VIEWING

So many bears use the area that some have talked of promoting "bear-viewing" opportunities there. Bear-viewing has become a multi-million dollar summer business in Alaska with people coming from all over the globe yearning to see bears, especially grizzly bears.

Weddleton thinks some viewing might already be going on in Bicentennial Park.

A couple years ago, he said, he was running on the Tour of Anchorage Trail when he ducked into the woods only to encounter "an old bald guy sitting in a porcelain tub filled with steaming water next to the north fork of Campbell Creek. He had a fire under it and was loving life. He said he lives down south and comes to Anchorage for the summer and lives in the Park. He'd made a stand in the trees where he said he watched the bears every night. He knew a lot about them."

The North Fork from near Campbell Airstrip Road to near where it joins the main stem just upstream from Lake Otis Boulevard is a popular feeding area for bears, especially in late summer when a hatchery-boostered run of silver salmon return. Hungry for fish, bears converge on the area from far and wide in the half-million acre Chugach State Park adjacent to the city.

Until last summer, it had never been a problem.

There were encounters. People saw bears. A few bears were shot in self-defense in the general area of the creek. But nobody was ever mauled.

What happened to change the equation is unclear.

More bears, some say. More people, others counter.

Fisheries biologists with Fish and Game note the king salmon run was later and weaker in 2008 than in previous years. Wildlife biologists note that big king runs in earlier years could have conditioned more bears to drop by to look for a possible meal.

Or maybe, as Farley has noted, it was all just an anomaly -- a bout of bad luck, so to speak, the wrong bears running into people at the wrong times in the wrong places.

BEAR-PEOPLE PLAN NEEDED

Nobody knows for certain, but Kent said it's clear people need to start talking about how to develop a plan for bears and people to safely coexist in Anchorage.

The waterways council, long involved in salmon and creek-quality issues in Anchorage, is trying to jump-start a public discussion about bear management. A committee of the Anchorage Assembly held a hearing on the subject in September, but little has happened since. Assemblyman Bill Starr from Eagle River wrote an ordinance proposing the hiring of a municipal wildlife officer to deal with bears and other wild-animal issues, but discussion on that has been put off until March.

The Anchorage Bear Committee has discussed bear hunts, trail closures and other actions, but the committee has been talking for years without much happening. The bear committee is so low profile that Kent said that when she learned about the group last summer, she thought it was something new.

Kent believes the bear committee needs to play a more active role, particularly as the municipality moves toward restoring historic salmon runs. A new fish pass under construction at the west end of Westchester Lagoon this fall promises to make it easier for salmon to get back into that drainage to spawn. Farley has warned that if large numbers of fish are allowed to do so, they could lure bears

into the heart of the city.

A 731-pound, 15-year-old grizzly hit by a Land Rover near Cal Worthington Ford in Midtown early on Aug. 22 was believed to have been scoping Chester Creek for salmon just before he walked out into the roadway. And that was when only a hardy handful of salmon were fighting through a faulty fish pass to get back to the spawning grounds.

Kent plans to get Farley, area biologist Rick Sinnott, representatives of the bear committee and others into a discussion about all of this at the Council's annual meeting Friday at 7 p.m. at the BP Energy Center.

"I expect to see a big turnout because of the topic," she added. "I think everybody needs to come. It's an opportunity for the bear committee to hear from some people."

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