

Wildlife Management in a college town, or what to do if you meet a bear walking home from the bars

By Sarah Sparhawk

University of Colorado, Boulder, senior Stephen Dorsey took his usual route home from the bars in the dark, early Friday morning. His stomach full of cheap beer and his wallet void of anymore drinking money, he left his roommate downtown and walked the streets, congested with other college students of varying degrees of coherence back to his apartment.

Turning down a familiar dirt alleyway to home, located near Baseline Road and Broadway Street, Dorsey overheard a racket in the garbage and recycling containers that lined the alley. His inhibitions still lowered from the bars, he strolled closer. Perhaps, he thought to himself, it was yet another hungry raccoon – a common sight on and around campus.

But in the harsh, yellow light of a nearby street post, the darkened figure took shape into what Dorsey immediately knew was no raccoon.

“...Instead a small black bear stood up and began sniffing at me,” he said.

Given the increased density of people around large universities – and the increased likelihood that many more people than usual are intoxicated in some capacity – college towns are a unique environment as it is, but the Colorado college towns of Fort Collins and Boulder have an extra unique relationship with wildlife, due to their proximity to many wild spaces.

Nicole Vieira, assistant professor at Colorado State University’s Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology Department, was also once an ecologist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) prior to teaching and is aware of the challenges with wildlife a university town presents.

“I think at this point, because Fort Collins is kind of developed out so much, we’ve become pretty well versed in knowing we could have deer in our back yard or mountain lions or bears anywhere in our neighborhood,” said Vieira. “All the way from the people who live against the Front Range, all the way out to the highway, we’ve found animals like that all over the place.”

It is important, Vieira notes, to distinguish that a human/wildlife conflict can be anything from a mouse in your house to a much larger predator, like a bear, in the alley behind your apartment. While concerns such as diseases are an ever-present cause for worry with a small animal just as much as with a big one, this definition allows for a broad opportunity for a human to interact with any wild animal and have it be referred to as a “human/wildlife conflict”. However, it is the larger animals that are of the greatest concern in a university town. In fact, the chances of running into black bears in Boulder, much like Dorsey did, seem to have been so common the past couple years that the city drafted a 2014 plan to handle the likelihood of an encounter with humans.

“In 2013, four bears were killed due to public safety concerns. In spring 2014, one adult bear was euthanized after ingesting antifreeze and one young bear was relocated after accessing trash,” said Val Matheson, urban wildlife conservation coordinator for the City of Boulder.

The reoccurrence of misfortunes prompted the creation of the Bear Protection Ordinance, interesting for the fact that it aims to protect bears from human error, and not the other way around. According to Matheson, the city hopes to do this by enforcing the requirement of secured, bear resistant trash containers close to wild areas, such as Chautauqua Park, a popular outdoor spot located a mile from CU Boulder’s campus.

“There are densely populated areas where we have bears,” she said. “In those areas, like most of the area west of Broadway, it is important that we build awareness about how to co-exist with bears in town.”

This approach to managing human and wildlife conflict is what CU Boulder Ecology Professor, Marc Bekoff, believes is most necessary in an area like Boulder.

“I think we need to manage [wildlife] by having the humans take responsibility for their actions,” he said. “The wildlife situation has gotten out of hand just because, often time, people don’t want to do very simple things to reduce the likelihood of it happening.”

Bekoff believes this is especially thanks to humans that wildlife conflicts in college towns are occurring in the first place.

“The animals are coming down into town,” he said. “Because we’ve driven them into town because of development, and around Boulder, although people are supposed to use bear proof garbage cans, they don’t or they don’t want to.”

Unfortunately, even with these considerations, it is still usually the animal that receives the punishment if caught red clawed in an urban setting. Vieira says that megafauna, such as large predators, are allotted a certain amount of strikes. If the animal is a repeat offender, despite attempts to sedate it with tranquilizer darts and relocate, it must be euthanized. In Fort Collins, she says that CPW prefers to try a boots-on-the-ground-type technique to limit human interaction with a bear or a mountain lion.

“We prefer to go door-to-door and tell people just leave it alone,” Vieira said. “Let the animal just do its thing and let it leave by itself rather than just running in to dart it right away.”

Besides wild animals, another common sighting is college students who have indulged in alcohol or marijuana on late evenings. Matheson says Boulder also relies on outreach to the communities most affected by human and wildlife conflicts as Fort Collins does. This includes the Hill, a popular area west of CU Boulder's campus for partying – and often intoxicated – students. While the coherence of students is a concern in managing animal encounters, approaches are the same in these instances, though, not surprisingly, are more difficult to implement.

“I have been on bear calls in the middle of the night on the Hill, building awareness,” said Matheson. “And teachable moments are not occurring when people are intoxicated.”

Students may be at a greater risk for harmful interactions with animals, due to decreased observational skills or more of a willingness to behave in a risky manner, according to Bekoff, who has lived to write about his own encounters with wild animals, some of which have been comical.

“I once had a young, male black bear casually stroll onto my deck, try to swat open a screen door that leads to my dining room, where I happened to be eating dinner at the time,” Bekoff told. “He stepped back when he couldn't get the door to open, looked at me, and just hung out until I went to the door and asked him what he thought he was doing.”

Other stories he has been fortunate to recall, such as being so close to a mountain lion in his own neighborhood, that he and the animal could have “easily shaken hands”.

“Of course, I was terrified and ran up the hillside, wearing clogs, yelling all the way ‘There's a lion here, there's a lion here!’” he said. “The lion just stood there watching me run, thank goodness.”

Bekoff admits that running was the worst action to take in his encounter with the lion. And, luckily for Dorsey, with some quick thinking, he lived to tell his tale of bears and bars, as well.

“I stared at [the bear’s] feet and slowly began backing away, only turning around to run into a neighboring house,” he said.

So, then, what should you do if you meet a bear coming home from the bars?

For starters, do not ever turn your back and run, as Bekoff did when he met the mountain lion, which Boulder wildlife officials warn is a very dangerous reaction to a large predator. Even in an alleyway, most of the same actions should be taken as if in the wild.

“The one difference there might be is if an animal feels cornered. Moving away from the animal slowly, making sure to relieve their tension and not have them feel like they are cornered,” he said, “You surely shouldn’t run, but increase your body size and yell at them,” he said.

Sounds like a great tactic to ward off drunken college kids, too.

Both Fort Collins and Boulder produce information pamphlets to share with the community on how to handle an encounter with a potentially dangerous animal. In addition, wildlife management will often work closely with the universities in town to spread the information.

“Actually, to Colorado State University’s credit, their Extension’s Office puts out tons of pamphlets on how to deal with animals that can cause problems in urban areas,” said Vieira.

The hope is that these pamphlets, Vieira says, is that residents can be educated enough to make their own smart decisions about an animal, and that there is not a need to call the agencies in town. The same is hoped for students attending both universities, and Matheson hopes that providing the correct information will inspire students to act correctly in preventing encounters, as well in the chance that one happens.

“The best way for students to support and implement the [Bear Protection Ordinance] is by closing (latching) the bear resistant dumpsters and carts,” she said. “I see dumpsters propped open and carts not latched in areas with high student residences.”

As for Dorsey, his close encounter of the black bear kind has taught him a valuable lesson about getting home from the bars.

“Maybe I will pay the 200% Uber rate next time,” he said.

Matheson says that calling for help if you encounter a bear can save that bear’s life because it allows for wildlife officials to “haze” or frighten the bear so it will learn to avoid people. Call either your city’s non-emergency service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife or 911 if a bear is threatening a human.

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