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NEWS

## Bears in Marin spur calls for healthy habits

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by **Sam Mondros**  
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Sightings of black bears have increased across West Marin over the last five years, and especially in the past year. Now, a collaborative of bear advocates is raising awareness about how the public can avoid unsafe situations and is reaching out to local wildlife experts to create a centralized database of bear activity.

“It’s amazing that we’re on this forward wave of black bears, learning how to live with them in a new way,” said Meghan Walla-Murphy, who founded the North Bay Bear Collaborative three years ago. “But it’s important to remember that bears are not the problem and that we’re all navigating the same ecosystem.”

Multiple sightings in Marin over the last year have led Ms. Walla-Murphy and other bear tracking specialists to believe that a mother bear and her cubs are traversing wildlands and, occasionally, neighborhoods. She and others have been noting their findings in a private database and recording their sightings on iNaturalist, a social media app.

Since the disappearance of the California grizzly bear by 1924, black bears have slowly been colonizing regions of the Golden State. In areas like Lake Tahoe, poor food

management and the influx of trash from year-round tourism have led to dangerous interactions at times. To those in the North Bay Bear Collaborative, it's not about if, but when black bears become a part of life in Marin. Avoiding relationships like the one in Tahoe requires awareness and preventive measures, they say.

There are an estimated 35,000 to 45,000 black bears statewide. In places like Napa, Sonoma and Marin Counties, their increasing prevalence is leading naturalists and wildlife experts to consider how people and bears can flourish in the same ecosystem. Sharron Barnett, a field institute instructor with the Point Reyes National Seashore Association, said there should be no reason for bears to search for food in neighborhoods.

“Provisions are ample in the wildlands of Marin, from acorns, huckleberries, or the occasional rabbit,” she said. “We need to take steps as a community to keep food from being in the open.”

The collaborative encourages people to seal their trash cans and compost bins with bungee cords or locks, store animal feed indoors, and survey their property for anything that might be inviting to bears.

Ms. Barnett said working with waste management companies and parks to figure out how to contain trash will be another central part of co-existing.

“It's not a matter of if the bears will populate this area, but when,” Ms. Barnett said.

Sightings in May and June from the San Geronimo Valley and Nicasio west to Inverness and the Point Reyes National Seashore were almost certainly of the same animal, wildlife experts said at the time. Yet subsequent scat sightings and video footage of two cubs point to the presence of multiple animals. Dave Press, the seashore's wildlife ecologist, told the Light in June that there was likely a young male in the park searching for new territory, and that once it was unsuccessful in finding a mate, it would likely move on. Five sightings of confirmed bear scat in West Marin have since been recorded on iNaturalist.

Wildlife conservationist Peter Barto is working with Ms. Walla-Murphy and other wildlife specialists to create a database of bear sightings in Marin County. Mr. Barto set

up cameras in the Mount Tamalpais watershed above Fairfax after finding bear scat in July. His video footage caught two cubs playing around in a body of water. Ms. Walla-Murphy said the mother was likely not far from the cubs.

Though she is unsure where the bears are coming from, Ms. Walla-Murphy said they are likely dispersing from Humboldt in the north and from the Mayacamas in the east.

The North Bay Bear Collaborative is working with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to define population estimates in Sonoma and Napa Counties. The project began when Ms. Walla-Murphy reached out to Benjamin Sacks, the director of mammalian ecology and conservation at the University of California, Davis, about doing DNA testing of scat samples. Fish and Wildlife expressed interest in funding the project if the collaborative could provide people on the ground to collect the evidence. Dr. Sacks is now analyzing the data.

Ms. Walla-Murphy said that although Fish and Wildlife is mostly interested in population estimates, her collaborative has more questions about bears' diet and their dispersal patterns across the North Bay. She said the collaborative is continuing its efforts to develop a reliable database comparable to the one created by the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, which has amassed over 30 years of data on Bay Area birds. She said One Tam and other groups are interested in continuing bear studies in Marin.

The collaborative is also working with Indigenous groups, youth organizations, land trusts and local and state parks agencies to spread awareness on the emergence of bears, in hopes of building a lasting network of educated conservationists. The group is using funds from two grants to teach Kashaya youth in Sonoma about bears, their habitats and their dietary habits in relation to humans.

Last month, Ms. Walla-Murphy spoke to the board of the Marin Resource Conservation District, expressing interest in having a rancher become a collaborative member of her group and act as a liaison with the agricultural community. Bears, whose diet is 90 percent vegetation and insects, occasionally go after livestock. The abundance of ranches in West Marin leaves domestic animals particularly vulnerable to an influx of bears exploring new territory.

“Chickens in a coop is like shooting fish in a barrel for bears,” Ms. Walla-Murphy said.

*To learn more about the North Bay Bear Collaborative, including volunteer opportunities, go to <https://beingwithbears.org/>.*

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