

BEARS

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"We have never had a bear attack in Florida," says Gary Morse, a Lakeland-based spokesman for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Regarding the recent case in San Carlos Park, Mr. Morse says authorities determined the bear was not threatening.

Because the state considers black bears a protected species, an unprovoked killing is a third-degree felony, which carries the possibility of a \$5,000 fine and five years in prison.

Although the number of encounters involving bears and humans is increasing, Mr. Morse says there is no cause for alarm. "Bears generally are very shy, and seek to avoid people," he says. "It doesn't take much to scare one off." His advice should a bear wind up in your backyard? "Don't be frightened. It's probably just wandering through. Leave it alone. Don't approach the bear or run toward it."

And never, under any circumstance, he stresses, should anyone feed a bear.

Mr. Morse estimates that Florida's bear population is about 3,500. It takes about 30 square miles to support a bear, so it's not unusual that one will occasionally stray into spaces normally occupied by humans. Those bears that do stray are invariably attracted by something associated with food, so keeping garbage and pet food secure will diminish the chances of an encounter.

If a bear does attack or exhibit hostile behavior, Mr. Morse advises contacting local authorities and the FWC hotline at (888) 404-3922.

"In most of these incidents, the bear is probably more frightened than the human," he says.

Bullish on bears

Down in Naples, David Tetzlaff has bears on his mind, too, but for an altogether different reason. In fact, Mr. Tetzlaff is positively bullish on bears. As the director of The Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens, he has ample reason for his enthusiasm.

Mr. Tetzlaff and his staff are putting the final touches on a new black bear habitat that upon opening May 23 will be the largest such exhibit at any zoo east of the Mississippi River.

Mr. Tetzlaff says the new exhibit will help visitors understand black bears. And he believes that is the first step in allaying fears that may have arisen as a result of recent bear sightings.

"I want people to respect animals, not be afraid of them," he says. "You can't appreciate animals if you're afraid of them. As much trouble as we're having these days with habitat laws and endangered and threatened species, if people are afraid of these animals, they are not going to care about their survival."

The zoo's new bear habitat cost \$750,000 to construct and encompasses 15,000 square feet. Two young black bears, a male and female, will occupy the space. The bears were not living in the wild before taking up residence at the zoo.

"These bears were in dire circumstances before they came here," Mr. Tetzlaff explains. "They were in a private facility, in a backyard, and it was a substandard facility. Their owner died, and they could have been euthanized."

Both animals are about 4 years old; the female weighs about 165 pounds, and the male tips the scales at close to 300 pounds, he says. (Life expectancy for black bears is somewhere between 15 and 30 years; and a full-grown bear can reach 500 pounds.)

"These bears are lucky; they got a new lease on life, and they will live in the best bear exhibit in North America,"

"Don't engage the bear. Just leave it alone. Do nothing to provoke it."

— David Tetzlaff, director of The Naples Zoo



PHOTOS COURTESY LORI YOUNG

Above, one of the black bears in The Naples Zoo's new habitat that opens Saturday, May 23. It will be the largest such exhibit at any zoo east of the Mississippi River. Left, David Tetzlaff, director of The Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens.



Mr. Tetzlaff says.

The zoo habitat features a natural setting, complete with a railroad trestle that spans a creek, as well as a layout that approximates an urban backyard.

"We set it up to look like a backyard for a reason," Mr. Tetzlaff says. "We want people to see this and realize that, yes, a bear could come into their backyard. That's very important. The purpose of this habitat — other than entertainment — is to teach people how to live with bears."

Many Floridians erroneously believe that bears are only to be found in the northern United States and Canada. It shocks some to discover that Florida boasts a substantial bear population. Mr. Tetzlaff says it is a constant misconception, even among people who have lived here all their lives, that there are no bears in Southwest Florida. "We have bears in Collier County and Lee County and all over Southwest Florida."

Although no one knows for certain, Mr. Tetzlaff estimates there could be 500 to 1,000 black bears here. "They can adapt to live anywhere," he says. "They can live in British Columbia, and they can live in Big Cypress. And this isn't something new. The bears have been here forever."

While Florida has yet to record a bear attack, Mr. Tetzlaff says that fact does not negate the need for caution when an encounter with a black bear occurs.

"Many people look at the black bear as cute, like a teddy bear," he says. "They

see grizzlies as ferocious and black bears as cuddly. But statistically, black bears injure or kill more people than grizzlies." He's quick to add that most local encounters are a result of a bear looking for food "or just exploring. They are not looking to harm."

Face-to-face encounters

Naples Zoo visitors will also learn safety tips regarding black bears at the new exhibit. "We will talk about face-to-face encounters, and how to protect yourself," Mr. Tetzlaff says. "We'll also discuss what you can do on your property to discourage bears." For example:

- If you feed your pets outside, bring the food in when they are finished.
- Don't leave your barbecue grill outside. "Whether the grill has food on it or not, the bear can smell it a mile away," Mr. Tetzlaff says.
- Keep bird feeders out of reach of bears.
- Don't put your garbage out at night; put it out in the morning.

Mr. Tetzlaff, an avid bow hunter, says he has had six encounters with bears while in the woods and none turned ugly. But that is not to say there is no danger in an encounter.

"Most of the time nothing occurs, but if an encounter gets bad, it gets bad fast," he says. "Don't engage the bear. Just leave it alone. Do nothing to provoke it or attract it. If a bear comes for you, you are in trouble. They can run at 30 miles an hour, and they can climb a 100-foot tree in 30 seconds. With that in mind, you should never run from a bear if it comes at you. You can't outrun the bear, and by turning and attempting to flee you are acting like prey."

If a bear does attack, Mr. Tetzlaff advises that you "act big, act tough and yell at it." If that doesn't discourage the bear, then he says "fighting back" is advisable.

The opening of the bear habitat coincides with the zoo's 40th anniversary. The zoo was the brainchild of Mr. Tetzlaff's father, a 6-foot-6-inch-tall swash-buckler known as "Jungle Larry." *The Plain Dealer*, a Cleveland newspaper, said that Jungle Larry "lived a life as big as legend as an animal trainer, expedition leader and conservationist." Jungle Larry appeared in three "Tarzan" movies in which he wrestled alligators as a

stand-in for Johnny Weismuller.

In 1967, Jungle Larry and his wife, Nancy, who was nicknamed "Safari Jane," happened across what was then the Caribbean Gardens in Naples and saw the potential for bigger things.

"They saw this little attraction, which didn't have any animals — it was just trees and some birds at that time — and they thought it would be a really neat place to put wild animals," Mr. Tetzlaff recalls.

Two years later, the Tetzlaffs bought the small attraction, introduced animals and named it Jungle Larry's Zoological Park.

From those humble beginnings, the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens has emerged. Since 2005, the zoo has operated as a nonprofit that is governed by a board of directors. It is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, something that only 10 percent of the zoos in the United States can boast. The zoo encompasses 43 acres, with about 30 of those acres in active use. Its annual operating budget is about \$4 million and it employs some 50 people. New attractions, such as the bear habitat, are financed through donations and grants.

More than 260,000 people visited the zoo last year, and Mr. Tetzlaff expects attendance to spike this year because of the bear habitat and, oddly enough, the struggling economy.

"I think we are getting more people because with the economic conditions people are looking for things to do close to home that don't involve as much travel and expense," he says.

The zoo is still a Tetzlaff family affair. Mr. Tetzlaff's brother, Tim, wife, Kelly, and son, Sasha, all hold positions at the zoo.

Before becoming zoo director, Mr. Tetzlaff, who is 46 years old, followed his father's footsteps and was an animal trainer — yeah, one of those guys with a whip and a chair — who specialized in big cats. He gave up the excitement of animal training for the administrative work of running the zoo, and — despite his love of animal training — hasn't looked back.

"I hope to do this the rest of my life," he says. "And I hope we can keep getting better. For me to walk away from this or not do the very best I can, would be disrespecting everything my parents worked for and built." ■