

Sunday Local News



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LOCAL NEWS BRIEFING

Bear-wise rules in Wingfield Reserve aim to protect people — and bears

By **STEPHEN HUDAK**
Staff Writer

Bears that lumber into Jay Exum's yard in Seminole County get their picture taken.

Remote, tree-mounted cameras around his property which backs up to the Wekiva River conservation area often capture images of bruins snooping for food, sometimes wrestling, or just passing through.

The candid footage is fun to watch, but the videos also helped Exum, a wildlife biologist and an ecological consultant, persuade his homeowners association in Wingfield Reserve to adopt "bear-wise" rules that require residents to

use lock-top bear-resistant trash containers.

The pictures are "definitely awe-inspiring and it's definitely reflective of a great feeling that I have that the bear population is doing fine," said Exum, who recorded his comments for presentations to the HOA board, a wildlife group and for his website, www.exumassoc.com.

"At the same time, of course, it's a reminder that we're living in an area of potential conflict with bears and in an area where humans are causing conflicts because of our behavior."

The new rules, which mirror those adopted in 2014 by the

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HOA in neighboring Wingfield North, are intended to protect people and bears.

Wingfield North, a gated community along Markham Woods Road, south of Heathrow and west of Interstate 4, was the site of the state's worst reported bear attack. A woman walking her small dogs Dec. 2, 2013, was mauled by a female bear with cubs. Six months later, the community became the state's first to adopt "bear-wise" rules, guidelines drafted by Orlando lawyer Gary Kaleita, a partner with Lowndes, Drosdick, Doster, Kantor & Reed.

The canons emphasize

personal responsibility — punishable by fines — in the struggle to protect both residents and black bears.

Nuisance bears often are euthanized by the state Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The rules forbid bee-keeping, feeding pets outside, and leaving out trash, bird seed and other grub that may unwittingly lure bears and other critters into the wooded neighborhood. Exum's cameras, for instance, captured footage a few years ago of a monkey tiptoeing into the neighborhood.

Residents who violate the "bear-wise" rules risk fines for deliberately or unwittingly attracting bears.

Wingfield North has benefited from its year-old pol-

icy — evidenced by a drop in nuisance-bear complaints, Kaleita said.

"It was not immediate...At first, the bears spent time trying to get into the new cans but after a while they recognized they could not do so. Now, if they enter the subdivision, they tend to pass through instead of staying..." he said in an email.

"Of course, some bears are persistent and some are new, so we still have incidents where they are poking around looking for food. ... In order to reduce the likelihood of an incident where someone opens their garage door only to find a bear right outside trying to get into an empty can, we [recently] modified our policy to require than any cans used for food waste — even if empty

— be stored in the garage or a bear-proof enclosure approved by the HOA."

The HOA hasn't fined anyone for violating the new rules, but several residents have received warning letters, Kaleita said.

Mike Orlando, a bear biologist with FWC, said the agency has documented a "pick up" in nuisance bear complaints in communities surrounding Wingfield North over the past year. "I think the new rules are one of a handful or reasons, but probably the biggest one," he said.

As in Wingfield North, Wingfield Reserve's HOA is bearing the cost for the new lock-top trash containers.

Exum said the association has set aside about \$30,000 to cover costs.

Less than 20 of Wingfield Reserve's 185 homeowners already own and use the bear-resistant bins.

Most of Wingfield Reserve's homes sit on lots of an acre or more in size and many are shaded by mature canopy trees that naturally produce piles of acorns, one of the staple's of a bear's diet. The neighborhood is 14 miles north of downtown Orlando at the edge of a wildlife corridor that runs from Rock Springs Run Reserve through the Seminole State Forest to the Ocala National Forest, home to the state's healthiest bear population.

Exum said he and his neighbor view wildlife positively, including bears, but some have come to accept as "normal" bear behavior that

is unnatural. For instance, bears lounging near porches or wandering leisurely through back yards when the naturally shy animals should flee humans.

Wingfield Reserve's new policy was adopted last week as animal-welfare advocates stepped up protests of the bear hunt set for Oct. 24, the state's first legal hunt of its largest native land mammal since 1994. A lawsuit aimed at halting the hunt failed Thursday to persuade a judge to act.

State records through Oct. 1 show 2,360 people have bought a license for the hunt, including 701 in Central Florida.

shudak@
orlandosentinel.com