



**Humane
World for
Animals™**

Formerly called the
Humane Society of the United States
and Humane Society International

Building Bear-Aware Neighborhoods

Tips for talking to your neighbors about bears



Why talk to your neighbors about bears?

Whole communities need to chip in to keep bears and people safe from human-bear conflict. If you live or vacation in bear country and care about bears, one of the most important steps you can take is to talk to your neighbors. Even if your home and yard are free from bear “attractants,” a bear could be drawn in by your neighbor’s trash, bird feeder, chicken coop or grill. Bears who use human spaces and food can be dangerous. When you talk to others in your community

about steps that reduce attractants, you’re taking a vital action to protect bears.

In this guide we offer five tips for things you can do to help build a bear aware community. Each step is small on its own, but it’s one less hazard for a bear or bear family. Every step makes it easier to do the next step, allowing you to work with your neighbors to create a bear-aware community.

1. Be the one who starts the conversation

Good news—you don't need to notice a problem before you start the conversation! Sometimes people think they have to wait until there's an issue, such as unsecured attractants, before talking to their neighbors, but some of the most effective conversations start with common ground. And it can feel nicer, too.

If you are talking to your neighbors about a shared interest, such as bird watching or your pets, you can use that as a natural time to discuss bear safety issues.

People tend to be more open to change when you are nonjudgmental, focus on the positive, and engage in open-ended questions and active listening.

“Have you noticed bears attracted to pet food in our area? How do you plan to protect your pets? I'm going to try limiting the amount of pet food I put out—and cleaning it up immediately afterward. And if that isn't enough, I might try only feeding my pets inside.”

This is called framing, or how you discuss a topic. Instead of a loss frame (“this behavior hurts bears”) try a gain frame (“by making this small step, you can protect bears”).

2. Be a bear-aware (and self-aware) communicator

When you talk to others about bear safety measures, you can use some techniques to make the conversation easier and probably more successful.

First, share your own story of how you came to care about bears and what made you start looking for ways to protect them. It's OK to talk about struggles you had with making changes to protect bears. In fact, discussing your own challenges helps the other person feel more accepted in making small steps themselves. Not being “perfect” actually makes you a better messenger!

Autonomy, competence, relationships

People are most responsive when you communicate in a way that respects their autonomy (their ability to make their own decisions), recognizes their competence (ability to do something successfully), and draws on relationships.

For example, you could say: “Can we help each other protect bears? If you'd like, we could remind each other the morning of trash day and then grab a coffee.”

“

“I heard about a bear who was killed because he came too close to humans and was deemed a risk. That really upset me and made me realize that I should avoid unintentionally feeding bears. I did some research and learned that it helps if I wait to put out my trash until the morning of pickup. I'm thinking about buying a bear-proof trash can—do you know anyone who has one?”



3. Make a bear buddy!

A bear buddy is another person who cares about bears in your community. Tip 1 mentioned common ground and how it can help start conversations with someone about bear safety. Perhaps this person cares about animals (wildlife or pets) or does something else to help the environment, such as biking to work or growing a pollinator-friendly garden? Ask this person to be your bear buddy! When you and a friend practice behaviors together, it makes both of you more likely to stay with habits that help bears.

Some of your neighbors will be more or less likely to change their behavior than others, an idea known as segmentation. Rather than starting with someone who seems very challenging (e.g., someone who is actively opposed to environmental initiatives), look for a conversation that’s “low-hanging fruit.” Find people who already have shown interest in animal protection or environmental causes.



Bears love fruit

Make a plan with your bear buddy to pick all your fruit as soon as it’s ripe. Pear trees can be picked clean as soon as the first pear falls. Consider asking if your bear buddy will go door to door with you to share tips for picking ripe fruit with your other neighbors.



4. Conduct spring and fall bear audits

Early spring (late March or early April) and late summer (late August to September) are the perfect times to do a “bear audit.” Use our checklist below or make your own. Having checklists helps doctors, pilots and grocery store shoppers make sure they haven’t forgotten anything. Get together with your bear buddy (or buddies if you have them) and help each other go through this checklist to make your homes and community safe. Just a couple audits will help keep bears protected throughout the year!

If you don’t remember to do two or more of these, one is still better than none! And you can always set a calendar alert so you remember next year.

Bear safety checklist

- **Secure trash:** Find a place to store your trash that is bear-proof (e.g., a bear-proof trash can or an inside area until the morning of pickup).
- **Reduce access to bird feed:** Remove bird feeders or put a reminder in your calendar to only put them up in the winter.
- **Reduce pet food attractants:** Find an indoor place to feed your pets.
- **Grill safety:** Store cleaning supplies in a place where you can easily clean and cover the grill after each use; set up a system to clean the grill accessories after use.
- **Fruit trees:** Look for trees on your property that could attract bears; remove any fruit on the ground, and make a plan to harvest the fruit as soon as it’s ripe.
- **Protect your poultry:** Safeguard chickens using bear-resistant coops and electric fencing.

5. Keep the momentum going

Once you've taken one step toward being bear-aware—whether it's changing how you store your trash or picking fruit as soon as it's ripe—you're on your way to starting new bear-aware habits. Think of ways that you (and your bear buddy/buddies) can keep the momentum going by bringing in others in your community.

When conversations about bears become widespread in your community, it helps people remember and reinforce habits that protect bears. For example, if everyone in the neighborhood knows that late fall is the time to put up bird feeders, this can become a community-wide tradition, similar to putting up (or putting away) seasonal decorations.

Furthermore, hosting your own event or organizing a bear activity at a local festival can also create opportunities for social connection through environmental initiatives. You can build community while helping bears!

You can protect bears by removing bird feeders when bears are spotted or, even better, removing all bird feeders except during the winter. Consider replacing bird feeders with bird-friendly native plants and perches (see bearwise.org/how-to-attract-birds-not-bears). Instead of relying on feeders, try organizing birdwatching trips to local parks.

The more that people perceive other people changing (e.g., making their property more bear-friendly) the more they want to change as well. This is the power of what psychologists call dynamic social norms!



Learn more

Bear facts to keep yourself, your community, and bears safe:

Bears come out of hibernation in the spring and prepare for hibernation in the fall, so they are typically most determined to find food at those times. But a bad food year in local ecosystems (such as a year with a poor native berry crop) can drive them into human communities in the summer. Dispersing juvenile bears may also target readily accessible human-provided attractants such as trash and bird feeders.

Bears are smart enough to learn habits. Once a bear becomes used to human food sources, biologists call that bear “habituated,” and it’s more likely that the bear will get too close to a human in the future.

In the U.S., state and federal wildlife agencies are usually responsible for responding to habituated bears. If a habituated bear is deemed a threat to human safety, the authorities may determine that the bear needs to be killed.

That’s why it’s best (for both bears and people) to take actions to prevent run-ins with bears before they escalate into conflicts that require wildlife agencies to become involved.

In addition to the information provided in this guide, you can use the resources below to help your neighbors become more bear aware.

Additional resources:

Both wildlife protection organizations and governmental organizations have numerous resources available to help you help bears. All of these organizations emphasize the steps we’ve discussed in this guide, such as securing your trash and removing potential attractants:

humaneworld.org/blackbears

nps.gov/bears

bearwise.org

bearsmart.com



Our mission

**Together, we tackle the root causes
of animal cruelty and suffering to
create permanent change.**



humaneworld.org

©2025 HUMANE WORLD FOR ANIMALS, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

COVER PAGE: BRUCE MONTAGNE / DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; PAGE 1: BILL LEA/BILL LEA PHOTOGRAPHY;
PAGE 3, FROM TOP: DAVID PAUL MORRIS/FOR HUMANE WORLD FOR ANIMALS; ALLISON GIBSON/ HUMANE WORLD FOR ANIMALS;
PAGE 4: DON JOHNSTON AGEFOTOSTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; PAGE 5: BLICKWINKEL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO