

# LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

**Human-wildlife interactions describe relationships between people and animals that can result in negative or opposing impacts on people, natural resources, and habitat. These interactions occur in a variety of contexts, including hunting, transportation, passive-appreciation activities, land use, and recreation. Some human-wildlife interactions are uneventful and do not have negative results. Others, especially those noted in case studies of whitetail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) in my home state of Michigan and black bear (*Ursus americanus*) in New Jersey and Colorado can be significant and have negative results. I also want to thank Bruce Leopold, of the department of wildlife, fisheries, and aquaculture, at Mississippi State University and Michael R. Conover, editor of *Human-Wildlife Interactions* and professor of wildland resources at Utah State University, for their insights regarding human-wildlife conflicts and the natural resource issues resulting from these conflicts.**

## DEALING WITH DEER

Hunting for waterfowl, upland game, deer, bear, and elk in Michigan is a significant pastime for both residents and non-residents. The variety of habitat in the Lower Peninsula, which ranges from dense forests and lake systems in the north to flat farmland and urban areas in the south, provides habitat—some better than others—to many animals throughout the

state. Whitetail deer hunting, particularly during rifle season, is truly an annual event in Michigan. The season lasts from November 15 to November 30, during which approximately 700,000 residents log many miles and hours in the field hoping for a shot to fill their freezers. In fact, for many, November 15 is treated as just another day off work or school.

Like other states, Michigan controls its whitetail deer populations through hunting. Normally, people hunt deer in their natural habitat; however, with rapid development, habitat loss, urbanization, and human population growth, people can now find deer in their own backyards. As a result, human-wildlife interactions occur between people and deer in suburban areas, especially in Detroit, Michigan. For example, surrounding areas of Detroit fall into the Huron-Clinton Metropark, a system of 13 parks that are spread across 25,000 acres in southwest Michigan. The metro parks are considerably large, covering thousands of acres, and they encompass woods, lakes, golf courses, and picnic areas in which people like to frequent and spend time. The metro parks are also an exceptional sanctuary for whitetail deer as they provide food and cover in the woods, on the golf courses, and in the adjacent neighborhoods where the deer graze on hostas, daylilies, and homeowners' vegetable gardens. Thus, deer tend to encroach upon habitat that is normally occupied by people. Due to the human population density near the Detroit metro parks,

hunting for deer is appropriately not allowed, and as a result, human-wildlife interactions occur. In order to control deer populations in this area, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) relies periodically on sharpshooters (e.g., police officers) and organized, supervised hunts. After the hunt, the meat from the animals is donated to food pantries. Residents have, for the most part, agreed with this control methodology because it protects their plants and vegetable gardens from future attacks.

Interestingly, each organized, supervised hunt has been followed by a decrease in highway deer-vehicle collisions (DVCs) around the parks. While deer in this area are a nuisance to the nearby residents and drivers, they do not often present a threat to the larger human population. However, deer-human conflicts can be very dangerous, especially in regard to the number and frequency of DVCs throughout the country. In Michigan, for example, there are approximately 50,000 reported DVCs with an estimated \$130 million in damages every year. DVCs have the potential to cause damage to the driver and passengers, not to mention the animal itself. According to the *Insurance Journal*, DVCs throughout the United States cost \$4 billion every year, and this rate has been rising. The nocturnal habits of deer contribute to this problem; deer are not always easily identified when crossing the highway at night—until it is too late. These unfortunate

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circumstances present yet another reason why controlling deer populations is a prudent thing to do to minimize costs and negative human-wildlife interactions.

## THE BEAR TRUTH

We can find other examples of human-wildlife interactions in case studies of black bears in New Jersey and Colorado. We tend to think of New Jersey as an urban eastern environment, but, in fact, it has black bears in every county in the state. In June of 1953, the New Jersey Fish and Game Council declared that the American black bear is a game animal. In 1971, wildlife management dictated that the hunting season for black bears be closed because the population was threatened. Over time, the moratorium on hunting allowed the black bear population to rebound. Thus, as the human population continued to grow, so did the number and frequency of bear-human interactions. New Jersey residents in all counties have experienced black bears rifling through their garbage bins and walking through their yards. Black bears, which have an acute sense of smell and a fantastic memory, habitually return to places where they have found food—people food, pet food, garbage, birdseed, small mammals, and livestock—successfully.

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Because black bears and humans often come into contact in New Jersey, the state has developed and implemented educational programs to discourage people from feeding birds and to secure their garbage in bear-tight containers in suburban areas where bears are encountered frequently. Successful seasonal educational programs include posters that are plastered around campgrounds and on the Internet, with catchy phrases such as "Be Bear Aware" and "Know the Bear Facts". In 2010, in an attempt to further cut down on bear-human interactions, New Jersey reinstated a hunting season for black bears. During the 2015 black bear season, which was extended, 510 black bears were harvested.

Another prime area for bear-human conflict is Colorado, which has experienced rapid human population growth—from 2.9 million in 1980 to over 5.3 million in 2015. The majority of the growth has occurred on the I-25 corridor, the west side of which coincides with prime bear habitat. In the 1990s, the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Commission (CPWC) estimated the population of black bears in Colorado to be between 10,000 and 12,000. Now, the population is estimated at 17,000 to 20,000 bears. In Colorado, unlike in New Jersey, black bears have

significant variation in their habitat and food sources due to the lack of rainfall. When their habitat is destroyed, they seek out alternative food sources and will often travel to the suburbs to find them. Black bears are highly mobile, have large home ranges, and benefit from human foods; thus, black bears have been aided by human population growth and development within or near black bear habitat. In 1992, due to reasons of ethics, a citizen referendum cancelled the spring bear-hunting season between March 1 and September 1, during which hunters would normally use bait or dogs to support the hunt. Black bear hunting declined significantly in 1993 as a result. Today, there is still a fall season that is in place to control the black bear population.

A situation I found myself in with my oldest son, Morrie Jr., and his 6-year-old daughter, Grace, brings the human-wildlife interactions discussion closer to home. We have a summer home in Grayling, Michigan, on a small lake, which is well within the range of black bears. Last August, we were enjoying an evening with a bonfire on the beach, when I looked over the shoulder of my son and saw what I thought was a black lab walking down the shoreline. I soon realized it was a mature black bear boar, and when he got



within 150 yards, I advised my son to quietly take his daughter into the house. Thankfully, my son responded immediately. The black bear walked through our backyard, and he sat on our sea-wall along the creek that drains the lake. Though the situation was harrowing at first, in the end, all of the kids got to enjoy a real wildlife experience. Why was the bear there? The neighbors had been feeding the birds regularly, and this bear appeared to have successfully located the bird feeders. We experienced several incidences of bears knocking the feeders over to get to the bird feed. The lake association and the MDNR strongly suggested we cease feeding the birds. We all did, but since black bears have excellent memories, we worried that this black bear would be back for another lunch.

The above story and comments reinforce the North American Model of

Wildlife Conservation that we, as members of the Boone and Crockett Club, all embrace. At its core, hunting is a management tool that results in healthy wildlife populations. Obviously, in the suburban areas where hunting is not allowed, other control methodologies must be considered. Our hunting heritage and belief in the North American Model is important in controlling wild game populations to minimize dangerous human-wildlife interactions.

Every year when I go out to Cody, Wyoming, to visit friends and go fishing, we always carry bear spray. The cliché is that you only need to be the second slowest runner to be safe! I thought that was humorous until this past year when I had a bad case of gout, and now I think I am the slowest runner in the group! ■