

# Living in bear country

We are blessed to be Appalachian Americans! I have traveled all over the world during my 28 years of military service and there is no better place. Our mountains have changed significantly for the better in many ways since I first left in 1984.

One of the ways is that our black bear population is starting to recover from the devastation of thousands of acres of lost habitat, the extinction of the American chestnut tree, and overhunting. The only place you heard of bears was in Cades Cove, Tennessee when I was growing up. The population was so devastated that bear hunting was prohibited in Georgia beginning in the 1920's through 1979. black bears are the balance in healthy ecosystems. They are both Keystone and Indicator species so their rebound illustrates that our Appalachian ecosystems are also on the rebound.

Another way that we have changed for the better is that people have come to realize the beauty of our mountains and they come from all over the country to live, work, and play here. Thousands of people from the metro-Atlanta area escape into the mountains each weekend to get back to nature and decompress from their day-to-day jobs "inside the perimeter." The cabin and tourism industry is economic development for our region. We want that and encourage it.

As tourists and those

of us that live in Bear Country, we interact with nature because we find it relaxing, adventurous, and refreshing. However, our actions or inattentiveness, whether intentional or not, have consequences. Putting these two very positive factors together increases the probability of Human and black bear conflicts. How we reduce this risk is by proactively educating our seasonal and permanent residents, and our visitors.

Government is not the answer but a partner in the solution. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources state in their January 28, 2019 Strategic Management Plan for black bears in Georgia (2019-2028), "Understanding normal bear behavior and educating the public about bears is critical when dealing with human-bear conflicts."

They identify their challenge as being the logistical constraints of responding to hundreds of bear complaints, balancing the needs of the bears, and the public's desires.

Many of us identify with the American black bear. They are a part of our Appalachian heritage. The potential for human and black bear conflicts is not going to go away. The black bear population continues to increase and human encroachment into the mountains will not stop. Part of Sustainable Tourism is not leaving a trace or having a negative impact on the natural resources, economy, or culture of the places



**Gerald Hodge and his wife, Connie, live in Cherry Log.**

we visit.

We need help both short and long term in educating the public to help lessen the friction and keep both our black bears and humans safe. It is time for local, state, and Federal government agencies, chambers of commerce, the tourism and travel industry, corporate entities, non-profits, and volunteers to partner to protect the American black bear.

For more information on living responsibly with black bears, visit [www.bearwise.org](http://www.bearwise.org).

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