

THE BEAR LADY

BY
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NORTH COUNTRY BEAR TECHNICIAN NANCY COMEAU WORKS
TIRELESSLY TO HELP BEARS AND HUMANS GET ALONG

Late one hot Friday afternoon in July, Nancy Comeau listens intently to an urgent call on her cell phone. Sitting in her government-issued truck, she jots pertinent details on a notepad at her side. There's trouble afoot at a well-known summer resort where a black bear has been walking about the grounds, day and night, seemingly oblivious to onlookers. A seasoned professional, Comeau fires off key questions: How long has the problem been occurring? When was the bear last observed? Are there any attractants on site?

The rear seat of Comeau's truck is piled high with the paraphernalia of a specialized profession – boxes of batteries, fence chargers of various models, brightly colored plastic pistols known as “bird bangers,” bundles of wire ties, and sound-makers called “Critter Gitters.” The truck bed is loaded with more tools of the trade – spools of electric fencing, bundles of fence stakes, wire cutters, steel grounding rods, snarls of used fencing, mauls, a stake pounder, offset fence wire hangers, hammers, and boxes of nails. Somewhere in the cab, there are always boxes of fresh, and sometimes not so fresh, donuts – bait necessary for luring a bruin into a culvert trap. Several bottles of vanilla extract, which bears find attractive, are shoved in the pocket of the truck door. All of this equipment is critical to Comeau's job as a bear technician. On any given day, she may use much of it as

she deals with bear-human conflicts across the North Country.

Putting down her phone, Comeau begins a drive that may take an hour or more. She has determined that a site visit is necessary to figure out the best method for dealing with the resort-strolling bear. Veteran that she is, Comeau is already convinced that this is most likely a “people problem.” She has dealt with hundreds of similar calls over the years, and she knows that it is not natural for a bear to be roaming around a congested human setting.

When Comeau reaches the resort, it does not take long for her to discover what is attracting the bear. The delectable odors from an unsecured grease pit are way too tempting. On each visit, the hungry bear flips open the lid and dips its paw into the grease, licking the bacon and meat drippings from it like a big furry popsicle. In fact, when Comeau arrives, she actually catches the bear in the act and proceeds to chase it out of the vicinity on foot, much to the amazement of resort patrons.

Comeau's solution to the problem was simple, yet effective. Working with the resort owners, she was able to convince them to create a locking bar system that would secure the grease pit lid, thus thwarting the hungry bruin. Because it went unrewarded in its subsequent visits, the bear ceased to frequent the location within a few days and no doubt wandered off to take advantage of natural foods found deeper in the woods.



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*The rear seat of Comeau's
truck is piled high
with the paraphernalia
of a specialized profession*



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If you want to avoid conflicts with bears you can begin right in your own back yard by taking down your bird feeders by April 1.



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Creative Solutions

With an average of 600 bear-human conflicts reported in New Hampshire every year, managers recognize the necessity of having seasonal field staff devoted solely to addressing these issues. Since 2002, the Department has had a cooperative relationship with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or APHIS, to jointly fund two bear technician positions, one assigned to the central part of the state and the other covering the North Country. Comeau has been on the northern bear country beat for the last 15 years, giving her an invaluable level of skill and experience in dealing with bear-human conflicts.

It takes a unique set of abilities to be an effective bear tech. The most important one is being able to communicate solutions clearly and firmly with all manner of New Hampshire people, from dour Yankee farmers with little tolerance for bears to recent urban arrivals who are deathly afraid of them. The level of cooperation

varies, but Comeau is never deterred.

Comeau excels at developing creative solutions. One day she might deal with a bear forcing its way into an unsecured chicken coop (solution: erect an electric fence). The next challenge might be a bear smashing through the plastic top of a restaurant dumpster (solution: bear-proof trash receptacle). She might be called in after bears have raided a commercial blueberry operation (solution: electric fence). For each of these situations, Comeau has to draw upon her extensive knowledge of bear behavior. She has lost count of the number of electric fences she has set up or the Critter Gitters she has deployed to dissuade persistent bruins.

During the height of the bear conflict season, Comeau and Fish and Game Bear Project Leader Andrew Timmins confer almost daily. On particularly busy summer days, they are like two generals on a battlefield, strategically mapping out an approach for dealing with multiple conflicts. What needs addressing first? What can be handled with a phone call? Where is a site



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Top: A bear-proof trash receptacle is your best bet for avoiding dumpster diving by a hungry bear. **Above:** Nancy Comeau works with a homeowner to protect a chicken coop by installing electric fencing. **Right:** Tranquilizing a bear and preparing it for relocation has become an all-to-common occurrence for Nancy and Fish and Game biologists.

visit needed? Wildlife biologists also lend a hand. Comeau's vast experience comes into play as wildlife biologists work together throughout the spring and summer as a close-knit, efficient, and effective response team addressing sensitive bear conflicts across the state.

In a real sense, Comeau serves as an ambassador for Fish and Game. She is an advocate for bears, while dispensing valuable advice and assistance to homeowners, farmers, and businesses. She also has mentored younger bear technicians and often educates town officials and community groups about dealing with bears. Comeau and Timmins have convinced a number of North Country towns to enact municipal ordinances which have proven to be an effective long-term solution to reducing the attractant of unsecured garbage.

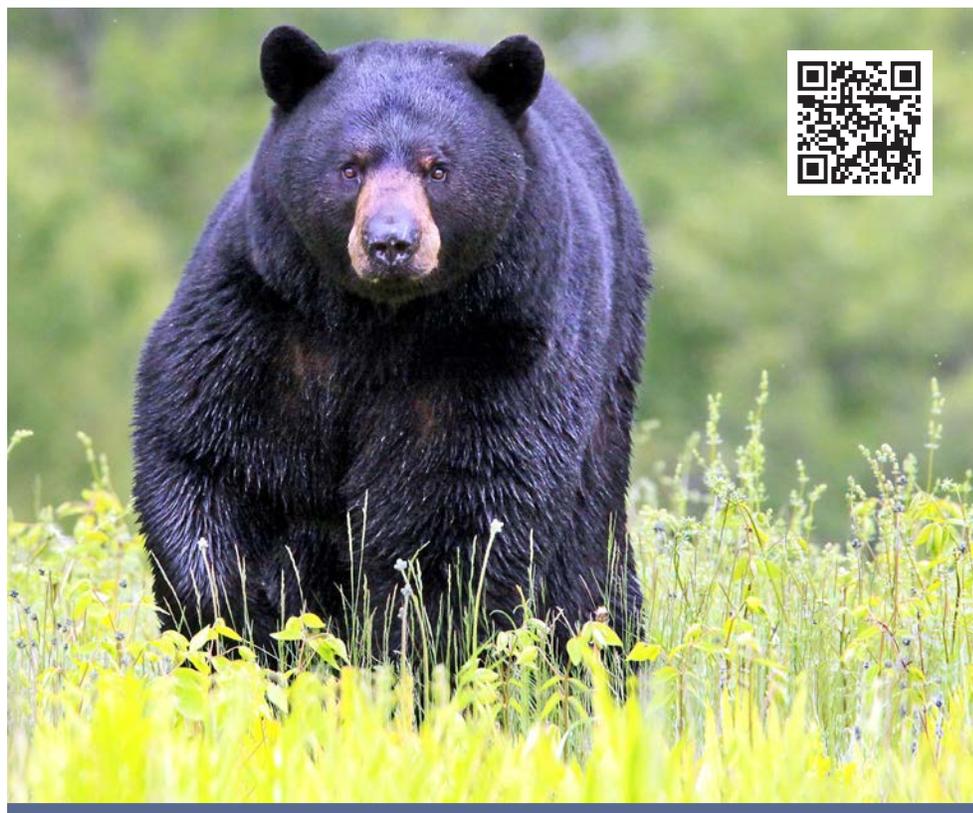
Bear Tales

At times, Comeau is called upon to trap and move a bear. This is always a last resort, when all other options have been exhausted and the bear's life may be at risk. Comeau has trapped and moved dozens of bears over the years, using big culvert traps mounted on trailers. On occasion, she has relocated entire bear families, a challenging task. She has a real skill for locating the traps strategically at each site. These can range from urban settings to campgrounds. Prior to relocating a bear, it is tranquilized and tagged with a set of plastic ear tags labeled with unique identification numbers, allowing Fish and Game to track its whereabouts in the future. Comeau then takes the furry offender for a long ride to a designated release site in far northern Coos County.

Comeau could write a book about her experiences as a bear tech. She has dealt with bears stealing lobster meat from a freezer in a "man cave," bears entering a home attracted by scented candles, and even a frantic bear demolishing a restroom when it had been inadvertently locked in the commode at a condo complex! It's all in a day's work for Comeau.

Sometimes Comeau's sense of humor is her best resource for handling the volume of calls and site visits a typical nuisance bear

Learn more about co-existing with bears at www.wildnh.com/wildlife/bears



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season brings. One particularly memorable call resulted in a site visit to a home in Randolph. The previous night, a bear had pounded on a woman's door and windows while her husband was away on a work trip. The house was clean and there appeared to be no attractants. There was, however, a fully mounted bear, from a successful hunt some years before, positioned right in front of a window. While the live bear slapped his paws repeatedly on the front door that night, the husband instructed the beleaguered woman over the phone (as she crouched, terrified, in the kitchen) to wheel the bear mount away from the window! She did, and the visiting bear eventually wandered off.

A Passion for Wildlife

Comeau's love of wildlife, especially bears, infuses everything she does. Her concern for the bears' welfare runs deep. Her creative solutions to conflicts have saved the lives of many bears, while effectively addressing landowners' issues. That's why

some North Country residents refer to her fondly as "the bear lady." Following her passion, Comeau earned a master's degree in Environmental Science and Policy from Plymouth State University in 2013. Not surprisingly, her thesis centered on evaluating techniques for hazing persistent bears from northern communities.

As New Hampshire enjoys another sultry summer, somewhere there will be an unsecured dumpster, garbage left out too long on a street corner, or an unfenced chicken pen tempting a desperately hungry bear. Comeau's cell phone will once again begin to ring, and she will calmly answer the call. It is comforting to know that we have a seasoned professional on the job, helping to ensure that this magnificent animal can continue to coexist with humans in the Granite State.



Will Staats is a Wildlife Biologist based in New Hampshire Fish and Game's Region 1 Office in Lancaster.