

Being bear aware and sustaining our wild-lifestyle

by Courtney Breest

Most Alaskans treasure the wild-lifestyle we lead, living side-by-side with wildlife. I know I do. On any given day, we will see eagles overhead flying to their nests with food in their mouths for their chicks, are impressed by massive bear tracks on a trail as we go hiking, and sometimes are late for work because there is a moose hanging out between us and our vehicle—I mean, we’ve all been there, right? With these wondrous Alaskan perks, however, comes the responsibility of creating a safe environment where humans and wildlife can coexist peacefully.

Every spring, we Alaskans begin to prepare for a fun and adventurous summer. We dust off the camping gear, plant our gardens, and make sure our fishing gear and other outdoor recreation toys are in working order. But we must not forget to check in with our wildlife safety plans. Springtime is an especially crucial time to be more aware of our actions and how they may affect the behavior of the wildlife that surrounds us. Bears are waking up ready to forage after a long hibernation, and moose calves are being born by their protective mothers.

In thinking through our wildlife safety plans, consider two main areas: preparing for travel in bear country, and securing bear attractants like garbage, bird seed, pet food, or compost piles around our homes and backyards. Bears can easily become habituated to human sources of food, leading to unsafe human-bear interactions and unwanted bear killings. By addressing these two areas, we will keep ourselves safe, as well as the bears.

Check out below for some FREE events this June where you can learn about how best to live and recreate in bear country, refresh your bear aware skills, and help maintain the wild-lifestyle that we Alaskans enjoy:

**June 8th—Stewardship Day at the Russian River
10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. at Russian River Campground**

Get hands-on at this hotspot for human-bear interactions. You’ll get to help with the behind-the-scenes preparations for the bears, fishermen, and tourists that flock to the river to enjoy the annual salmon migration. Defenders of Wildlife and the Forest Service in-

vite you to come out and help keep all the river visitors safe by putting up seasonal fences and informational signage that will help protect important wildlife habitat during this busy time of the year. Volunteers will be provided a T-shirt and pizza at the end of the day, plus free camping opportunities on Thursday, June 7th and Friday, June 8th at the Russian River Campground. RSVP required, email cbreest@defenders.org.

June 9th & 10th—Kenai River Festival Bear Awareness Booth

11:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. at Soldotna Creek Park

Come find the Bear Awareness booth at the Kenai River Festival hosted by the Kenai Watershed Forum. Learn more about the distinct species of bears on the Kenai, how to travel safely in bear country, and how to avoid attracting and food conditioning bears.

June 11th—Free Bear Spray Training

5:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m. at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center

Learn how to properly use bear spray so you are prepared for a possible bear encounter when out in bear country. You will get to practice deploying bear spray after a brief presentation. Whether you’re hiking, fishing, camping, or hunting, bear spray is the most effective and important tool to have at your disposal.

We must remember that preparedness and vigilance year after year is key, even if we haven’t experienced any negative wildlife interactions in the past or heard about incidents in recent summers. Incident-free summers are due to residents and tourists taking appropriate precautions and securing the attractants around their homes every year. Let’s maintain these good habits and encourage others to do the same if we want to continue avoiding negative encounters, which could lead to harming ourselves or the bears.

Courtney Breest is the Outreach Coordinator at Defenders of Wildlife—Alaska. Find more information about these events at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/121800611819412> or by emailing Courtney at cbreest@defenders.org. To learn more about Defenders of Wildlife in Alaska, visit <https://defenders.org/alaska/our-alaska-office>.