

What's bringing bears to the city?

After a young black bear was tranquilized in Whitby this weekend, and a little over a month since one was shot in Scarborough, the question remains — what are they doing here?



Why do black bears wander into urban spaces? (Dreamstime)

By **VICTORIA GIBSON** Staff Reporter

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When a young black bear came down from a backyard tree in Whitby this weekend, it moved slowly. It fumbled and fretted on the fence, then — with tranquilizer coursing through his system — landed softly in a residential yard.

For hours, curious neighbours had congregated at the house near Rossland Rd. E and Anderson St., where the bear had wandered from a nearby ravine into a local backyard.

Some brought bear spray, but some brought blankets for when the small bear came down.

“It almost turned into a bit of a street party,” resident Ali Modl, 22, told The Star. “Everyone was just hoping the bear was okay ... it was very calm, and everybody did what they were supposed to do. No one really questioned the cops.”

The situation — which began on Sunday morning, when Durham police received reports of several bears in Pringle Creek Park — lasted until evening, when Whitby Animal Control safely sedated the bear for relocation by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNS). “The bear was fine, and treated fairly,” Modl assured.

But the day’s conclusion drew a stark parallel to the end of a [similar saga in May](#), when a black bear was found roaming around backyards in Scarborough. Toronto Police called MNS, but were told that sending their staff to chemically immobilize or remove a wild animal was too dangerous in the dark.

Police don’t carry tranquilizers themselves. They couldn’t ensure the safety of civilians until MNS could arrive. So the bear was shot.

Dave Selby, a spokesperson for Durham Regional Police, is pleased the young critter on Sunday wasn’t harmed — but he acknowledged there are some other situations police just can’t control.

“If there’s a bear in an urban area, and we have the luxury of time, we’re able to reach out to the MNR and local animal services to help us deal with it,” he said. “But if it’s a potentially life threatening situation, we’ll have to deal with it a different way.”

Over the past few years, black bear sightings in residential pockets of Burlington and Newmarket have both ended up fatal shootings by police officers.

When police receive calls about bears in precarious situations, like ones in the past spotted in schoolyards, Selby said the call immediately demands a more serious approach. On the contrary, in more northern areas of Ontario, citizens tend to be more accustomed to bear sightings and less likely to call for help.

Anecdotally, Selby says there hasn’t been a change in reported bear sightings over the years, though he was unable to share hard statistics. “Pretty much every year, we have a few that wander further south than we normally see,” he said. “That’s not unusual, it does happen.”

So why are these bears on the move?

Mike Commito, the author of a report for Ontario’s Northern Policy Institute that delved into the history of black bear hunting management in Ontario from the early 20th century, said he’s seen two primary drivers for black bears coming into the city.

“There’s always been issues with bears encroaching into urban areas in Ontario,” Commito told The Star. “For the most part, that’s usually the result in shortages from natural foods.”

For example, he said, an early thaw or extended winter leads to crops not maturing or yielding as much fruit as expected. Bears then catch a whiff of unkempt and accessible waste in residential areas, and seek it out as a food source.

As bears are being drawn into city areas, Commito stressed the importance of a provincial government-run initiative called Bear Wise, intended to educate Ontarians on the risks of negative human-bear interactions. However, he says the program was sorely depleted during 2012’s \$50 million cut to the MNR’s overall budget.

Looking to the future, he said it’s hard to say how big a role climate change will have in human-bear interactions, as bears’ food sources are depleted. One factor people may not know increases bear sightings, he said, is the increased demand for green space within urban environments.

“Previously, [bears] may not be able to get to these areas. But with green spaces, it opens up passageways or corridor routes ... increased sighting doesn’t necessary correlate to an increased population,” he said.

“If the bear’s natural food source isn’t available in the bush, clearly they have an incredible range where they’ll go and look.”