

Resident has run-in with bear on nature trail

By JASMINE LINABARY
Bigfork Eagle

A Creston resident ran into a black bear while on the Swan River Nature Trail recently, quite literally.

Robin Tabors says she runs regularly on the trail and on the evening of Sept. 7 left later than usual to head out. She was about half way back down the trail heading west, having run its length already, and it was getting dark, when she came around a blind corner straight into a black bear that was heading down the hillside, likely to the water.

She fell backwards and, as her legs went out, she did what someone never wants to do — kicked the bear. She covered her head and closed her eyes.

"I could smell and feel his breath on me," she said. "I was thinking, 'Oh, God, just get it over with.'"

The bear stood up and then pounded on its front paws a few times on either side of her. But after a few tense seconds, it started moving on down the trail.

"He was a nice bear," she said. "That bear had every right in the world to go

off on me. Thankfully, he didn't."

Once he was a safe distance away, heading the same direction on the trail that she was, Tabors began making noise and he finally headed up the side of the bank.

"I then took off like I had the hounds of hell after me," she said.

Tabors said she made mistakes with things she knew better about — running when it was dark with no one else around, listening to her iPod with her headphones in and being out without her bear spray.

However, she hopes others can learn from her experience, especially at times like this when bears are active.

"I did a lot of stupid things I won't do again," she said. "Don't go out there when it gets late. It's just not safe. I just wasn't paying attention because I hadn't had a problem on that trail before. You just don't expect it."

Tabors said she had never seen a bear on the nature trail, but Tim Manley, a bear specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, said bears are seen fairly often in

that area.

"It's actually quite common to see bears on the nature trail," Manley said. "There's a lot of natural fruit along there."

Bear activity in lower parts of the Valley has picked up over the last few weeks as the animals work on their last big push for food before hibernation.

Berry crops were spotty in some areas, which leaves the bears looking to other sources of food to put on extra weight.

Five grizzlies have been captured in Northwest Montana in the last week and up to 20 calls about black bears throughout the region have been received a day over the past few weeks.

Black bears seems to be moving into the Valley's river corridors and have been showing up in areas where they are not usually expected.

A lot of how to respond to a bear encounter has to do with the situation — whether it was a surprise to both parties or whether the bear is preying on the individuals.

"She did everything right," Manley said. "It sounds like

she reduced her size. The bear realized nothing was going on."

That pounding behavior that Tabors observed is common, Manley said.

"They're basically trying to show how big and tough they are," Manley said. "And then they usually walk away."

Manley said if the situation had been different and the bear had been stalking the person, that's when it is important to fight back.

FWP also advises those who are out to travel in groups during daylight hours and make their presence known with loud noises, talking or singing.

Black bears are a bit more unpredictable than grizzlies, said John Fraley with FWP.

With grizzlies, it's important to appear non-threatening. The best thing to do is to carry bear spray, Fraley said.

"One-hundred percent of the time take pepper spray with you," Fraley said. "That's about as protected as you can be."

Currently there are reports of a black bear north of Bigfork and a grizzly in the Ferndale area around

Foothills Road.

FWP officials are working to capture the Ferndale grizzly which is reported to be killing chickens.

Most of the calls FWP has received have had to do with bears getting into bird feeders, pet food, garbage and fruit trees. Residents with such bear attractants are advised not to leave garbage where bears can get

into it and to take down bird feeders until Dec. 1.

FWP advises electric fences as a deterrent to protect fruit trees and livestock like chicken.

Black bears will be heading into their dens at the end of October and beginning of November.

Grizzlies start hibernation a little later but most will be in their dens by Dec. 1.