



TOMMY MARTINO

## BEAR TRAINER

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WE'RE SEEING MORE AND MORE grizzlies spreading out from their core recovery zones into areas where humans live. In those instances, two types of "bear education" can happen.

The bad kind is when bears learn that being around people and human structures leads to yummy food. Let's say a black bear or a grizzly follows a creek drainage down out of the mountains. The first house or cabin it runs into in the forest can make all the difference. Bears like birdseed, and if a feeder is up on the deck, the bear might crawl up there and also find dog food by the patio door and a barbecue grill covered in grease. Delicious! But this bear has now been trained to associate houses and cabins with food. It takes only one experience for a bear to start craving human-associated treats.

It's like when you take a child to a Dairy Queen for the first time—they never forget the experience and want to go again and again.

When that bear continues down the drainage, it will be even bolder about going into a garage or shed, or even a house. At that point, if the bear poses a safety threat to humans, we might be called in to trap and euthanize it. That's really hard on us, because we

know it's not the bear's fault that it became habituated to humans.

Fortunately there's another type of training—the good kind.

That's when we and the people living and working in bear country teach bears that it's not okay to be around houses, cabins, and livestock. We stress the importance of keeping outdoor grills clean, not leaving dog and cat food outdoors, and not feeding birds.

We also promote using electric fence, like the one shown here protecting a garden west of Missoula. These fencing systems aren't too expensive, and Defenders of Wildlife reimburses homeowners 50 percent of the cost (up to \$500) in eligible counties. By installing an electric fence around the perimeter of their living area, people who live in bear country can even set out bird feeders, feed their pets on the porch, and hang a deer—so long as it's all within the perimeter. When a bear comes to investigate, it gets a surprising jolt and quickly learns to stay away from fences, buildings, livestock, and people. We call this process, in which a bear is, in essence, training itself, "passive aversive conditioning." It's an example of bear education that's good for everyone, including bears. 🐻