

Hungry Bears Dig Up Graves in Northern Russia

October 28, 2010

The  Moscow Times

Famished bears in northern Russia have resorted to digging up graves in cemeteries — and reportedly eating at least one body — after a scorching summer destroyed their natural food sources of forest berries and mushrooms, officials said Thursday.

The brown bears' grisly habit is forcing locals in the Arctic Circle republic of Komi to mount 24-hour patrols, protecting their families and livestock with the concern that the bears might get a taste for fresher human flesh, said Pyotr Lobanov, a regional spokesman for the Emergency Situations Ministry.

Last summer was Russia's hottest on record, with raging forest fires and droughts wiping out woodland and crops, forcing the bears to forage closer and closer to human settlements as the winter hibernation period approaches.

Moskovsky Komsomolets reported that one body was devoured in the village of Verkhnyaya Chova over the weekend. Two visitors to the cemetery shrieked at the shocking sight of the animal tearing into half-decomposed flesh, scaring the bear away, the paper reported.

Domestic pets, goats and cattle have all fallen prey to the bears since the summer, prompting unsightly fences to go up around farmland and more thoughtful disposal of garbage.

And the signs are that locals are right to be more diligent: A man in his 20s barely escaped with his life when he was mauled by an aggressive bear in early September on the fringes of the regional capital city, Syktyvkar, the main local news channel reported.

Komi, about the size of California with the climate of Alaska, carries the nickname "Bear's Corner" because, as an area 70 percent covered by coniferous taiga woodland, it is ideal bear habitat.

Encounters with bears in urban areas are not common in the sparsely populated region, but they are becoming more frequent, officials said.

"This year is far worse than others," Lobanov said. "But people in the republic all know how to deal with this and know what can happen," he said.

Attacks on people by some of Russia's 140,000 bears are on the rise nationwide and are concentrated in the country's Far East, where rampant fish poaching often forces the bears to seek other sources of food, such as garbage.

In the most notorious incident, in 2008 a pack of up to 30 Kamchatka bears — which are similar to grizzlies — prowled around two mines of a local platinum mining company where they killed the two guards and laid siege to workers inside company premises.

Campers shot dead a bear that attacked and killed their friend off the Far East coast in 2007.

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