DEP NEWS RELEASE
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RAMAPO MOUNTAIN STATE FOREST REMAINS CLOSED DUE TO UNUSUAL BLACK BEAR ACTIVITY

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE LAUNCHING INVESTIGATION INTO POSSIBLE LINKS TO ILLEGAL FEEDING OF BEARS

(15/P89) TRENTON – Northern New Jersey's Ramapo Mountain State Forest remains closed due to continued unusual black bear activity in the area.

Out of an abundance of caution, the State Park Service will keep the 4,200-acre state forest bordering Passaic and Bergen counties closed until further notice due to continued bear activity in areas where hikers have reported being pursued by potentially aggressive bears in recent weeks.

Biologists with the Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish and Wildlife have euthanized a total of four adult bears in areas where these incidents have occurred. The bears had shown no signs of being fearful of people, suggesting that they had become habituated to people, possibly due to illegal feeding either by visitors or by property owners near the park, said Division of Fish and Wildlife Director David Chanda.

"We cannot take any chances when it comes to protecting members of the public who use this popular state forest for hiking and other outdoor activities. We must err on the side of protecting people," Director Chanda said. "Our technicians and biologists are experts in bear behavior and in their best professional judgment deemed that each of these bears posed a potential threat to public safety.

"It is extremely uncommon for bears to demonstrate so little fear of humans," Director Chanda added. "The Division of Fish and Wildlife is launching an investigation into why these bears are behaving in this fashion, focusing on whether intentional feeding by people on the trail or on private properties near the park is making these bears bolder, even to the point of pursuing people."

There is no shortage of natural food sources in the state forest, particularly acorns, Chanda said, adding that bears that associate handouts of food are more likely to pursue people in search of another meal.

Looped snare traps remain set in the state forest and are being monitored. The state forest will remain closed until Division of Fish and Wildlife and State Park Service experts are confident the trails are safe. Additional signage will be posted warning hikers and other visitors to not feed bears, as this can create aggressive behavior in the animals and is illegal.

Signs will also be offered to Bergen County's nearby Ramapo Mountain County Reservation, where a bear reportedly chased a group of eight people over the past weekend. The Division of Fish and Wildlife has also set traps in the county reservation. Based upon the Division of Fish and Wildlife's recommendation, the Ramapo Mountain County Reservation is closed. No bears have been caught in these traps as yet.

After responding to several unusual bear encounters, Ramapo Mountain State Forest was closed on Oct. 5. While continuing to monitor the closed park, the Division of Fish and Wildlife on Tuesday trapped and euthanized two black bears in an area of Ramapo State Forest where seven hikers have previously reported being chased by bears. These bears showed no sign of being wary of technicians who tended the traps.

Later in the day, a third black bear approached a Division of Fish and Wildlife biologist. This bear also showed signs of being potentially aggressive, would not leave the area and showed no fear of the technician. The technician euthanized this bear.

On Sept. 19, a 21-year-old-woman and a 7-year-old boy reported being followed and chased by a potentially aggressive bear. In a separate incident the same day, a man reported a bear would not back down and paced in front of him and his dog for several minutes before taking off. The area where the incidents took place was closed off.

On Oct. 3, two more encounters occurred. In the first, three female hikers reported being pursued by a bear. They came upon a man and his dog on the trail. All escaped unharmed. Later that same day, another male hiker reported that a bear swatted at him and pursued him for a distance before relenting.

A portion of the park was closed and two days later, the Division of Fish and Wildlife trapped and euthanized a bear believed to be involved in the incidents.

In most cases, encounters between people and bears end without incident. However, black bears are wild animals and the Division of Fish and Wildlife reminds the public that it is very important for people who live in or visit New Jersey's bear country to be alert to their presence, especially when hiking.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife offers the following tips when hiking in bear country:

- Never feed or approach a bear.

- Make your presence on the trail known by speaking loudly, singing, clapping your hands, or making other noises.

- Remain calm if you encounter a bear. **DO NOT RUN FROM IT.** Do not make direct eye contact with the bear, as this may be perceived as a challenge. **SLOWLY BACK AWAY.**

- Make sure the bear has an escape route.

- If the bear continues to follow you or is otherwise undeterred, make loud noises by yelling, blowing a whistle, banging pots and pans, or using an air horn, if available. Make yourself look as big as possible by waving your arms. If you are with someone else, stand close together with your arms raised above your head.

- If a bear stands on its hind legs or moves closer, it may be trying to get a better view or detect scents in the air. It is usually not a threatening behavior.

- The bear may utter a series of huffs, make popping jaw sounds by snapping its jaws and swat the ground. These are warning signs that you are too close. Slowly back away, avoid direct eye contact and do not run.

- Black bears will sometimes "bluff charge" when cornered, threatened or attempting to steal food. Stand your ground, avoid direct eye contact, then slowly back away and do not run.

- Black bear attacks are extremely rare. However, if one does attack, fight back. Do not "play dead."

- **If you see a bear, in particular one that does not show much fear, immediately contact local police or the Department of Environmental Protection's hotline at (877) 927-6337, or (877) WARN-DEP.**

For more information on black bear behavior, biology and tips, visit:
http://www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/bearfacts.htm

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