

More bears mean more strife at Lake Tahoe

By Mike Anton, Los Angeles Times

HOMEWOOD – She was born under a house on the west shore of Lake Tahoe and quickly became a beloved fixture in this rustic community.

She rambled through backyards and climbed into open windows to snack. She swam in the lake's impossibly blue water and sunned herself on the beach as if on an extended vacation.

Residents nicknamed her Sunny. She was one of Lake Tahoe's "celebrity bears" – animals so familiar, so seemingly at ease around humans that they've become de facto residents of this forested idyll where the boundary between wilderness and civilization has all but disappeared.

"She was the epitome of how bears and humans can coexist," said Ann Bryant, an animal rights activist here. "Until she was murdered."

The morning of July 30, Sunny was found dead on the beach, felled by a shotgun blast.

The killing infuriated Lake Tahoe's large and vocal community of bear lovers, who raised \$35,000 for a reward leading to the arrest and conviction of Sunny's killer.

Others thought that wasn't enough.

When no arrest was made, the suspected shooter's name and address were posted on a Facebook page established by a bear advocate to shame businesses with unlocked and overflowing dumpsters.

Reaction was swift – and, at times, disturbing:

I hope the person who did this is not only prosecuted to the fullest, but suffers the same fate Sunny did.

Can we have open season on the person who shot the bear??

Burn his cabin down.

Early November, and Lake Tahoe is dozing. Boats are gone for the winter, the notorious summer traffic has ebbed and neighborhoods of vacation homes are silent as ghost towns.

The bears, though, are hard at work.

An adult black bear will consume upward of 25,000 calories a day to prepare for hibernation. That's a lot of berries and pine nuts. Or, in the case of Lake Tahoe's bears, a lot of dumpster diving.

More than a thousand bear complaints a year are reported to officials on the lake's California side alone. They break into homes to forage in refrigerators, at times surprising terrified residents. They den under porches and have learned to twist the tops off food jars. They make the trash-can exploits of the Southern California bruin nicknamed Glen Bearian look like the fumblings of an amateur.

"It's been an enormous evolutionary change," said Bryant, who runs the Bear League, a self-styled detachment of some 250 volunteers who respond to calls round the clock from residents who've had a bear encounter. "The bears living here with us are evolving far faster than we are. They've learned to take advantage of us. We haven't learned to coexist with them. And they're dying for it."

At any given time, there are between 500 and 1,500 black bears around the lake. A mild winter in 2011-12 meant more cubs, and the parched backcountry was forcing more bears to scrounge for food in populated areas.

At one resort, three bears were legally killed after they entered numerous cabins; a cafe was evacuated when a bear strolled in during dinner.

The killings – among the approximately 90 bears handed death sentences here by game officials since 2009 – angered bear lovers.

Those killings lit the fuse. Sunny's death turned the anger to fury.

To say Sunny's poaching has spawned conjecture, rumors and conspiracy theories is like saying Lake Tahoe is kind of deep.

After the shooting, suspicion immediately turned to the owner of a property near where Sunny bled to death. Game wardens found no physical evidence; the shotgun left no ballistics. The man whom they call "a person of interest" got a lawyer, left town and has refused to be interviewed.

People reported hearing shots fired at 11:30pm – and at 6am. It was said that blood was found on the man's property and that he baited Sunny; there's no evidence of either, authorities say. A video taken earlier by locals purportedly showing the man loading a shotgun on his porch while Sunny was in a tree is of such poor quality it's impossible to tell who the person is and what he's doing.

"It's still a very active investigation," said Lt. John Lawson of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "But we need solid evidence. I've been trying to convey that to people – you can't arrest and convict somebody without evidence."

The bar is considerably lower in the anonymity of the Internet. The threats made in the aftermath of Sunny's death are not taken lightly in Lake Tahoe.

It's not uncommon for people who have sought state approval to have a bear killed to receive an onslaught of threats. Homes

have been vandalized. Even complaining about a problem bear to game wardens – who some see as the enemy – can bring scorn.

“People have been approached and yelled at in grocery stores simply for reporting bear activity,” said Placer County sheriff’s Capt. Jeff Ausnow. “They’ll say, ‘You can’t do that because they’re going to kill it.’ This is a very emotional issue here.”

Russ Tonda has owned property in Lake Tahoe for 40 years. He and his wife are self-described bear lovers. Their home decor had a bear motif: A carved wooden bear stood sentry in a bedroom; when the cuckoo clock chimed, dancing bears celebrated.

In early 2005, a sow and two cubs that had denned under the Tondas’ home broke in while they were away and trashed the place. The Tondas sought state approval to kill the mother. When the men they hired to do the job were charged by the cubs, they shot them too.

Threatening phone calls poured in. Strangers drove by Tonda’s place hurling insults.

“I hired two security guys for a time because I was afraid they were going to burn the place down,” said Tonda, 69.

They broke in instead.

“The vandalism was worse than what the bears did,” Tonda said. “They broke all the windows, the lighting fixtures. They threw bottles of wine against the walls.”

And they put Tonda’s wooden bear in the open front doorway. It was a message of sorts: The bears had taken revenge.

Bryant’s cluttered cabin in the woods is a menagerie of wounded and orphaned wildlife. Birds and chipmunks. Squirrels and raccoons. A porcupine, the victim of a car accident, relaxes on a shelf.

"I grew up around wildlife," Bryant, 61, said of her childhood in Minnesota. "I feel like I can look into their faces and communicate with them. They have as much right to life as we do."

Game officials applaud her work educating the public on how to secure their homes and what to do if they encounter a bear. ("Make noise. Pound your feet. Scream like you frickin' mean it," she says.)

With a long blond mane and forceful nature, Bryant is no bear whisperer. She responds to bear calls with a paintball gun and a shotgun loaded with rubber buckshot. Bears are quick learners; a few body blows, she says, can do wonders to put the fear of humans back into them.

She also has no compunction about getting into someone's grill if she feels a bear is in danger. Her ability to work up a lather no doubt played a role in landing "Blonde vs. Bear," a three-part reality show that aired on Animal Planet in 2011.

"For a lot of people, anything a bear does to cause them an inconvenience is a reason that bear should die," said Bryant, whose work has made her a polarizing figure, both beloved and hated. "They have no regard for nature or wildlife and they want it all to be gone. And whenever we speak up on the bears' behalf, we become the enemies."

But Bryant says she has no tolerance for vigilantism, even though the Bear League also published the name, address and phone number of Sunny's suspected shooter on its Facebook page. "All I want is for him to be brought to justice," she says. "I don't want his house to burn down."

Reports taken by Bear League volunteers read like a police blotter – lots of breaking and entering, vandalism, prowling and loitering.

Some callers are head-scratchingly clueless, such as the woman

who reported she was “mad, angry about buying a house in Tahoe. No one told her about the bears. Had a break in. Not happy.”

Others are clearly fed up, such as the man who reported that he tried to secure his home but it “didn’t work” – a bear leveled a garage door and cleaned out a refrigerator.

“Has gun for next time he comes back,” the report reads.

Standing in the way of détente is disagreement over what constitutes a problem bear.

“I don’t care if you leave your doors and windows open. If you have a 500-pound bear who’s comfortable with walking into somebody’s home – that’s not good,” said Carl Lackey, a Nevada Department of Wildlife biologist. “That bear has no fear of humans. That bear needs to be killed.”

Lackey, like Bryant, has become a lightning rod in the debate over bears. He has gotten “a death threat or two” over the years, he says.

But he and Bryant have much in common. Both have a deep respect for bears. Both say humans are the root problem. But both also concede that coexistence would require a level of voluntary mass behavior that would rival a migrating flock of birds.

“People up here don’t want to put up with property damage. But at the same time, they don’t want to prepare either,” Lackey said.

Unlike grizzly bears, black bears rarely attack humans. Since 1900, only 14 people have been killed by a black bear in the continental United States, according to a study published last year in the Journal of Wildlife Management. None was in California or Nevada.

“We’ve never had a death,” Lackey said. “But it’s coming. I

just hope it doesn't happen on my watch."

Bryant takes a similarly bleak view. Not of nature, but of human nature.

"I think a human is going to hurt a human before a bear does."