Drought drives bears into Tahoe-Reno area

By Kyle Roerink, Las Vegas Sun

Ernie Feld makes apple strudel, cookies and poppy seed pastries.

His Incline Village bakery is also known for bear claws – but not the confectionary kind.

Feld's scarred storefront – gouged by a black bear drawn by the scent of baked goods in October – is a glaring sign of the bear problem in the Reno-Tahoe region. The drought plaguing the West has diminished the natural supply of water and food at higher elevations where black bears normally roam. The dearth of provisions and a sense of smell 2,100-times better than humans have prompted black bears to forage among civilization.

In 2014, NDOW captured and released 93 bears – a more than 130 percent increase from 2009 and 34 percent increase from a decade ago. Last year, NDOW captured and released 97. Those numbers are the highest on record save for 2007 – a drought year that saw 159 captures. After bears are trapped, wildlife officials tag and relocate bears to the wilderness as part of an ongoing study. Research suggests bears will often return to familiar locations once they are released and continue previous behavior.

This year, the state handled an additional 45 bears that were either hit by cars, killed during hunting season or died from natural causes. NDOW euthanized three bears: the bear that wandered on the beach and two that killed livestock. The department says there are at least 300 bears in the Reno-Carson region of the Sierra.

The bear influx has spurred a debate about how communities can cohabitate with animals that can reach 400-plus pounds in a region known for tourists and metropolitan vacationers who think bears are a cute novelty.

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