



Forest Service

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News Release



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Juniper Prairie Wilderness now open to overnight camping *US Forest Service encourages responsible recreation*

TALLAHASSEE, Fla., March 19, 2019 – The U.S. Forest Service recently reopened the Juniper Prairie Wilderness and Juniper Run to both overnight camping and day use after the areas were closed for 30 days due to dangerous bear activity.

U.S. Forest Service officials, in consultation with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), issued a closure of the wilderness area after receiving multiple reports of a bear entering tents at a campsite. The most recent incident in late January was when a group of campers set up their tents with no food or other attractants inside. The group was cooking dinner approximately fifty yards from their campsite when a bear entered their tent.

While the campers followed “BearWise” guidelines, monitoring conducted by the FWC determined the bear associated tents with food, which posed a threat to human safety. As a result, the bear was humanely killed by FWC staff to protect the public.

According to the FWC and Ocala National Forest wildlife biologists, the capture and removal of a bear exhibiting learned aggressive behavior allows non-habituated bears to remain as uninfluenced by man as possible. This prevents them from learning negative behaviors. Removing the bear also provides for public health and safety in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness Area due to unnatural behaviors resulting from human influence.

“When visitors to the forest and wilderness areas do not properly store attractants such as food and toiletries, human-bear interactions are likely to increase as they learn that human structures, tents, automobiles, campsites and populated areas are possible sources of food,” said District Ranger Carl Bauer. “Habituated bears are more likely to be humanely killed to protect human safety, so reducing human-bear interactions will in turn help us protect and conserve bears on the Forest.” Everyone has to do their part, campers, hikers and visitors have a significant impact on the bears and other wildlife and practicing Leave No Trace (LNT) can help us avoid increased human-bear conflicts.”

The Ocala National Forest boasts a healthy black bear population and visitors should be “BearWise” while recreating on the forest. LNT can reduce and/or deter nuisance bear and wildlife activity, but following guidelines in developed recreation areas are just as important. Bears may frequent these areas too and disposing of trash in

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bear resistant garbage cans, storing food in bear-resistant containers and following the National Forests in Florida long-standing Food Storage Restriction Order are vitally important in deterring dangerous encounters with wildlife.

“If we had turned a blind eye to the bold behavior exhibited by this bear, a forest visitor or visitors may have been harmed,” said Bauer. “We have a responsibility to protect the public, and the public has the obligation to recreate responsibly. This means all visitors should carefully prepare for any recreational experience on the forest by visiting our website, other relevant websites like the LNT website or by contacting our ranger station.”

The National Forests in Florida Food Storage Restriction Order, which, if violated, can result in monetary fines and imprisonment is available online at <https://go.usa.gov/xEQed>.

For additional information, please call the Lake George Ranger District office at (352) 625-2520 or the Seminole Ranger District office at (352) 669-3153, or go online to <http://www.fs.usda.gov/ocala>. For tips and information on outdoor ethics visit <https://lnt.org/learn/techtips> and “BearWise” visit <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/bear/brochures/>

Visitors to the area surrounding the wilderness should report any nuisance bear activity to the FWC’s Wildlife Alert Hotline at (888) 404-3922.

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