

# Bear Smart Community Assessment for the Alberton, Montana Area

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## Introduction

This document was prepared by the Bear Smart Alberton Working Group as a baseline assessment of the actual and potential sources of bear-human conflict in the Alberton, Montana community as described in the Assessment Area Description below. A baseline community assessment is the first step for a community to take in proactively pursuing a reduction in bear-human conflicts through the Bear Smart Community program.

### **The Bear Smart Alberton Working Group**

The Bear Smart Alberton Working Group is an ad hoc committee of individuals with a keen interest in helping people and bears live safely together in our beautiful part of western Montana. The Group is composed of local citizens, government officials (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; Alberton Town Council, Mineral County), Alberton School representatives, and businesses (Republic Services). Wildlife biologists experienced in bear biology and management serve on the committee to advise the Group on technical matters.

### **The Bear Smart Community Program**

The Bear Smart Community program is an effort that originated in British Columbia, Canada ([www.bearsmart.com](http://www.bearsmart.com)) to systematically reduce conflicts between bears and people by following well-defined steps and practices. The program has since been implemented in numerous locations across Canada and the United States, including several communities in Montana. It has proven successful in enhancing the safety of both bears and people by reducing the number and level of bear-human conflicts. Virginia City, a town similar in size to Alberton, was the first community in Montana to complete the program. For a video describing their success, see this [link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YLCv3AfEVA) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YLCv3AfEVA>).

## Goals and Objectives

The goal of the Bear Smart Community Assessment is to establish a community-specific overview of actual and potential sources of bear-human conflicts in and adjacent to the community.

The baseline community assessment identifies:

- (1) Bear habitat and populations in the community and surrounding areas.
- (2) History of bear-human conflicts in and around the community.
- (3) Natural and non-natural bear attractants present in the area.

Looking at the history of bear-human conflicts around the community and identifying natural and non-natural attractants helps to focus efforts on addressing the root causes of bear-human conflicts. The results from the Community Assessment can be used by the Bear Smart Working Group, local government, businesses, school, and other community entities to establish community-specific priorities and direction for implementing a Bear Smart Community Program in Alberton.

## Assessment Area Description

Alberton is located in Mineral County in west-central Montana. This community of approximately 400 people lies along the Clark Fork River between the Bitterroot Range to the south and the Ninemile Divide to the north. The assessment area includes the incorporated Town of Alberton, as well as areas lying east of town to the Missoula County line and north of the Clark Fork River. Areas lying west of town a short distance past the mouth of West Mountain Creek are also included. The map below outlines this area. Once the Bear Smart Community Program has been successfully implemented in this area, other outlying parts of the greater Alberton community could be added pending public interest. In fact, any landowner anywhere could implement Bear Smart practices on their property at any time they choose, and they are encouraged to do so.



Map of the Alberton Bear Smart assessment area.

## Methods

Information on bear-human conflicts in the Alberton area was gathered from several sources. These include records of bear-human conflicts documented by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP), Mineral County Sheriff's Office reports, local resident interviews, social media posts, photographs, and videos, waste disposal business records, and direct observations by working group members. Local knowledge was used to help identify the types of potential bear attractants in the community. Attractants and their associated safety hazard potential were reviewed and prioritized by the working group with input from experienced bear biologists.

## Results

### Community Description

Alberton lies in the narrow Clark Fork River valley near where the major tributaries of Fish Creek, Ninemile Creek, and Petty Creek enter the stream. The town is one of two incorporated municipalities in Mineral County, Montana. It was established by the Milwaukee Railroad in 1908 and served as a division point with company offices, maintenance shops, a roundhouse, and employee housing until closure of the railroad in 1980. With the completion of Interstate 90 in the 1970s, Alberton has become more connected to other populated areas including the county seat of Superior 30 miles to the west and Missoula 30 miles to the east. Recent population growth in Montana is stimulating Missoula's westward expansion, and Alberton has become, and increasingly will be, a bedroom community for that city. This is resulting in subdivision development in Alberton and surrounding areas, along with an expected increase in bear-human interactions. Currently there are very limited laws, ordinances, or regulations in Alberton or Mineral County designed specifically to minimize bear-human conflicts. Traditionally, bear-human conflicts in the community have been tolerated until they became too severe to ignore. Then, bears have been removed occasionally by trapping and translocation, but more often by shooting.



**New subdivision going in adjacent to Alberton.**

### Bear Population

The mountainous, forested environment surrounding Alberton is excellent bear habitat. The coniferous forests provide good cover and security for bears, while an abundance of herbaceous and shrubby vegetation, including several types of fruiting shrubs, produce a nutritious diet. Although bears are mostly dependent on a vegetative diet, carrion from, or predation on, deer, elk, moose, bighorn sheep, and a variety of smaller mammals provide a rich protein source for bears. As fall hibernation



**Alberton area black bear**

approaches, bears enter a state called hyperphagia when they are looking for large quantities of food to quickly put on fat before entering their winter dens. It is at this time, especially during years when natural foods are not abundant, that they are likely to come into town looking for food and thus come into conflict with humans. Their need for food overrides their natural instinct to avoid humans. When these bears are rewarded by finding food in town, they become habituated to humans, lose their natural fear, become a public nuisance or even a threat, and often end up being killed as a result.

Two species of bears inhabit Montana, including the Alberton area:

**Black Bears:** Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are the most abundant, and they are considered a big game species in Montana where populations are estimated to exceed 13,000. It is believed that around 200 black bears live in their natural habitat in the area surrounding Alberton, and perhaps 50 of these come into town or outlying residential areas from time to time. Black bears have been coming into Alberton where they come into conflict with humans for essentially as long as Alberton has been in place. The level of conflicts varies by year depending on the availability of natural foods and the prevalence of non-natural attractants, but in general it seems to be increasing as more people move into the area.

**Grizzly Bears:** Grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) are a threatened species in Montana, and as such are protected by Federal law. Grizzly bear populations have been increasing under this protection, and the bears are expanding their range. Alberton lies between the well-populated Northern Continental Divide recovery zone and the sparsely- or unpopulated Bitterroot recovery zone and may serve as part of a corridor between the two. Grizzlies, presumably from the Northern Continental Divide, have been sighted near Alberton in recent decades. Although no grizzly bears have been seen within the Alberton town limits, they have been reported in every direction from Alberton and as close as the south side of the Clark Fork just across the river from town, at the natural pier bridge just west of town, and in West Mountain Creek west of town. The attractants that lure black bears into Alberton would be just as effective at attracting grizzly bears, and it is believed that it is just a matter of time before a grizzly bear enters Alberton.

## History of bear-human conflicts

Alberton is located in Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) administrative Region 2. MFWP bear specialists and game wardens manage bear-human conflicts in the state, sometimes with the assistance of county law enforcement.

Alberton has a long history of bear-human conflicts dating to the town's beginnings in the first decade of the 20th century. Like many Montana communities, these conflicts have resulted from insufficient efforts to secure attractants and make them unavailable to bears. Mostly, these insufficient efforts were due to a lack of the means or the knowledge of how to secure attractants from bears. There was also a lack of understanding of why it is even important to prevent bears from obtaining non-natural foods. Bears were largely viewed as a nuisance rather than a valuable game animal or a potential threat to human safety. If they became a problem, they were quickly disposed of. Alberton was very rural in its early decades, and its citizens maintained an element of pioneer independence. If there was a problem with bears, you took care of it yourself. Black bears could be legally hunted from March to November until 1971. Gradually, over the years, these perceptions of bears have changed. Many new people have moved into the Clark Fork valley, and these residents are



Historical photo of black bear in garbage.

less tolerant of nuisance bears, but also less accepting of having bears killed. Most people prefer to see healthy populations of bears living freely in their natural habitat and not being attracted into town.

### Black bear-human interactions

Black bears have historically come into the town of Alberton and surrounding residential areas each summer and fall looking for food. MFWP estimates there may be as many as 50 bears that frequent these areas at one time or another. It is not uncommon to have up to half a dozen bears in town at one time during an autumn evening. The bears that come into town quickly become conditioned to non-natural foods and habituated to human presence. They lose fear of humans, and even if aggressively chased off, they quickly return. Most bear activity in town occurs at night, but habituated bears do not hesitate to frequent the town during daylight hours. Students have had to be kept inside Alberton School because bears were prowling outside. In 2022, law enforcement had to shoot a bear within sight of the school.



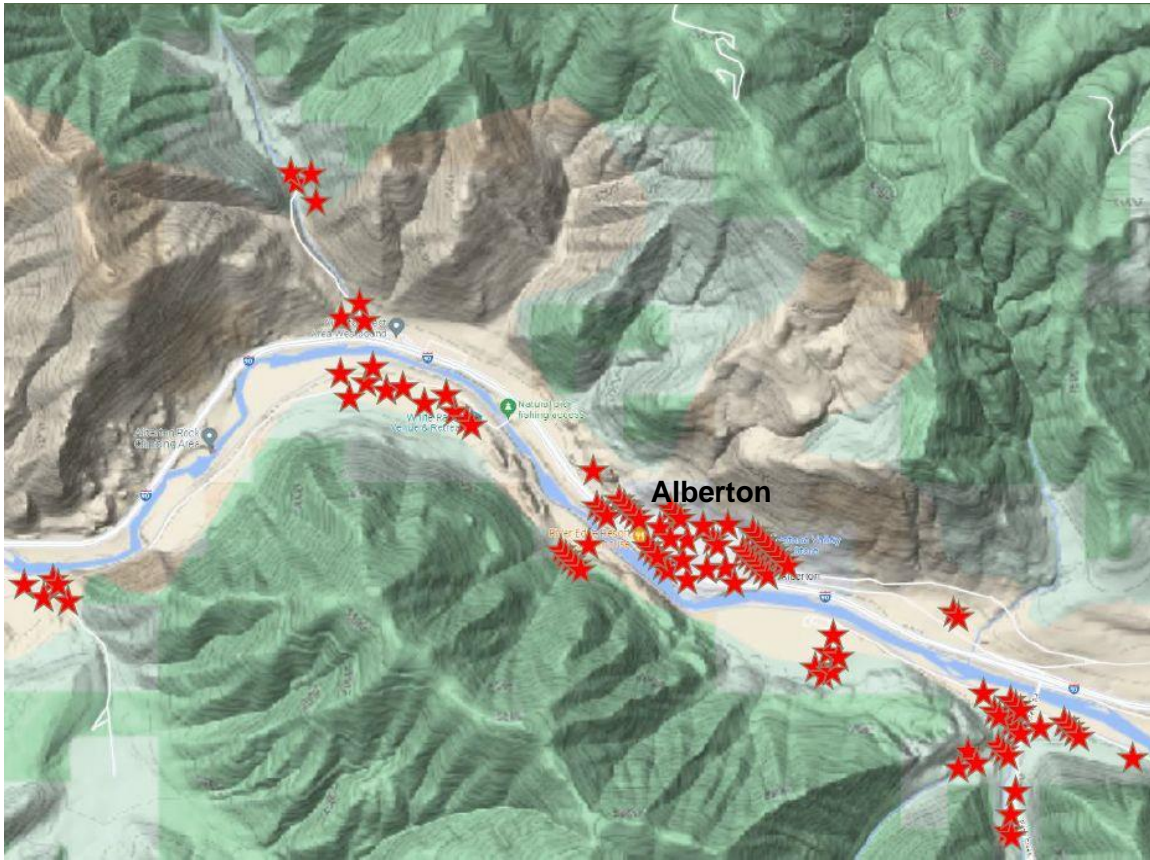
**Black bear at Alberton Post Office.**



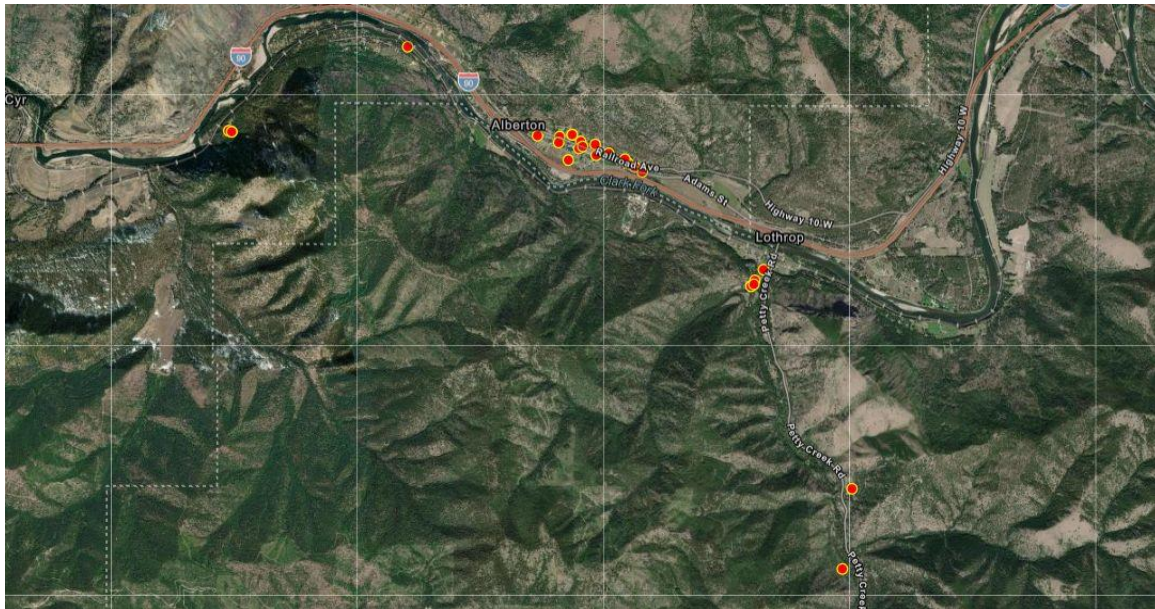
**Tipped over garbage cans in an Alberton street.**

Tipped over garbage cans and trash scattered in the streets are daily sights in Alberton when bears are visiting town. Vehicles and buildings have been broken into, causing significant property damage. In 2022, a black bear broke into a child's bedroom window causing property damage, but thankfully no harm to the child. Alberton's community orchard receives significant damage to its fruit trees during some years, and in 2022 the public fruit harvest had to be canceled, partly because of bears.

The first map below shows MFWP's record of black bear conflicts in and around Alberton during the period 1998 to 2021. MFWP estimates there were 70 to 80 bear conflicts during this period. The second map shows conflicts during 2022. It is important to recognize that these maps show only conflict records maintained by MFWP. Many other bear sightings, and likely other conflicts which were not reported to MFWP, occurred in the area. Another important fact shown by the maps is that the majority of bear conflict records occurred in the town itself. This observation is likely biased by the fact more people live in town, but it still shows the high level of conflicts occurring within the focus area of this assessment.



**Black bear conflicts near Alberton, MT 1998-2021 (MFWP)**



**Black bear conflicts near Alberton, MT 2022 (MFWP)**

As significant as bear-human conflicts are in Alberton, there is potential for even worse to happen. On average, about one person per year is killed by black bears in North America. Many more are injured. Conflicts at this level have been experienced infrequently, if at all, in Alberton, but the potential is

clearly present. Bears in close proximity to people, especially at night when visibility is limited, present a definite risk of injury.

### **Grizzly bear-human interactions**

All of the problems associated with black bears being attracted to non-natural food sources can occur with grizzly bears as well. Grizzlies, however, are larger and more aggressive, making the consequences of their food conditioning and habituation to humans potentially more dangerous. Grizzly bears occasionally severely injure or kill people in Montana. Therefore, their presence in a community in close proximity to people is intolerable. Whenever this situation occurs, grizzlies are typically trapped and relocated to less populated areas, or if they are repeat offenders they may be euthanized.

As noted previously, there are no records of grizzly bears being within the Alberton town limits. They are nearby, however. There is a record of a grizzly entering a person's occupied house in the West Mountain Creek area just west of Alberton.

Grizzly bear populations are increasing in Montana, and their range is expanding. Unless the present level of bear attractants in Alberton is reduced, it is likely that grizzly bears will eventually reach the town. Grizzly bears are a Federally protected species, and their management is shared by Federal and State agencies. If grizzlies were to become present in Alberton, bear management in the area would become more complex from both an administrative and a legal standpoint.

### **Bear attractants present in the area**

#### **Natural Attractants**

Bear habitat that includes native food sources occurs all around the Alberton area. While bears feeding on naturally occurring food sources is not considered a conflict in itself, it can bring bears into closer proximity to humans where conflicts may then occur.

Bears feed in spring on emerging grasses and other herbaceous vegetation. This begins first at lower elevations such as valley bottoms where towns and scattered human habitation typically occur. Huckleberries, chokecherries, serviceberries, mountain ash and other berry-producing shrubs are abundant around Alberton and provide food from summer through the fall period. Carrion from winter-killed ungulates or those killed by mountain lions and wolves is an important source of protein for bears. Bears also prey on deer fawns and elk calves during late spring and early summer.

All of these natural food sources can be found in the areas immediately adjacent to Alberton. As bears utilize these areas, they discover and become conditioned to non-natural food sources near or within Alberton. As bears utilize the available natural and non-natural food sources in close proximity to humans, they become habituated and lose their fear of humans. Young bears learn about these food sources from their mothers, and a continuous chain of inappropriate use of non-natural foods is established that passes from generation to generation. Even when individual bears are relocated or killed, this knowledge remains present in the population and the pattern of inappropriate behavior persists.



**Black bear foraging on spring vegetation.**

### **Non-Natural Attractants**

Nearly all bear-human conflicts in Alberton occur as a result of improperly stored non-natural food attractants. When attractants are properly secured, preventing bears from getting to them, the incidence of bear-human conflicts is greatly reduced. The community can play a vital role in preventing bear-human conflicts by responsible management of its bear attractants.

Below is a listing of the types of non-natural bear attractants identified in Alberton. Some of these are more numerous, and therefore more problematic, than others. Each, however, has the potential to attract bears into the town.

**Residential garbage** – Nearly every household in Alberton has residential garbage service. This is a highly attractive, abundant, and easy food source for bears. On a percentage basis, few of the residents in Alberton have bear-resistant garbage containers, even though these containers are available at a moderately higher monthly cost. Garbage service in Alberton is provided by Republic Services. They have been helpful in efforts to provide other communities with bear-resistant containers. Residential garbage is the most significant source of bear attractants in Alberton. A preliminary estimate showed that it would cost approximately \$62,000 to convert all residential garbage containers in Alberton to being bear-resistant. It should be noted that there are no solid waste disposal facilities in Alberton. All garbage is hauled out of the community.

**Commercial garbage** – Commercial businesses, such as restaurants, that produce bear attractants are not numerous in Alberton. Bear conflict issues at River Edge restaurant were solved a few years ago through a cooperative project to fence their garbage storage facility. Two other bar/restaurants exist in the town. Additionally, Alberton School fits within this category.

**Fruit trees** – Alberton has a 3-acre approximately 75-tree community orchard that attracts bears every year. Other smaller backyard orchards exist in the community as well as numerous scattered single fruit trees. Fruiting shrubs and berry vines like raspberries also fit into this category. The community orchard plans to install a multi-strand high tension electric bear exclusion fence this year as a demonstration project. Fruit trees are probably the second most significant bear attractant in Alberton.

**Bird feeders** – Bird feeders are common in Alberton, and these can present a strong attractant to bears. Seasonally removing bird feeders, or properly securing them from bears, may be mostly a public education issue. Teaching people how to erect and manage bird feeders so that they are secured from bears may be done at a relatively low cost.

**Small livestock** – This includes chickens, other fowl, goats, sheep, pigs, and possibly other animals. This attractant source can be secured by well-constructed electric fencing.

**Bees** – Bee hives are a very strong attractant to bears. Electric fencing is the best way to secure bees.

**Pet and livestock food** – Feeding of pets outdoors provides a bear attractant. Storage of grain and other livestock feed in open sheds or closed outbuildings is another bear attractant. Bears will not hesitate to break into buildings for food.

**Other sources** – There are many other potential sources of bear attractants, including some that may not commonly be thought of. Outdoor barbeque grills, back porch freezers, compost piles, and gardens are a few. Any place a bear can be rewarded by finding food is a potential attractant and should be secured.

An assessment of the relative abundance of the above attractants and their priority for being addressed is given in the table below. Abundance was assessed based on personal knowledge of the community and priority was established based on the judgment of the working group as to how much each attractant contributes to bear-human conflicts in Alberton. It is important to note that medium and low priority attractants are still a concern, but relative to high priority attractants, they are less urgent to address.

Attractant	Abundance in Alberton	Priority to address
Residential garbage	high	high
Commercial garbage	low	high
Fruit trees	high	high
Bird feeders	medium	medium
Small livestock	medium	high
Bees	low	medium
Pet and livestock food	high	medium
Other sources	high	low

## Public education and outreach

Public education and outreach relative to bears has been limited in Alberton in the past. A public workshop on building electric fences was offered by MFWP a few years ago. A presentation on bear identification, orchard damage, and the need for securing attractants was given to school children at the community orchard by MFWP and Center for Wildlife Information in 2022. Bears are a frequent discussion topic on the community's social media page, and information presented there by citizens is often inaccurate. As Alberton moves forward with becoming a Bear Smart Community, information and education will need to be an important component. In general, Albertonians like bears, are supportive of good bear management, but often just don't know what to do to be helpful.

## Laws, regulations, and ordinances pertaining to bear attractants

Alberton has an ordinance (Title 7, Health and Welfare, Chapter 7-1 Accumulations of Premises) that contains general language regarding upkeep of property, including storage of garbage. One provision in this ordinance provides that garbage containers must be designed in such a way that they cannot be dumped over by animals. Enforcement of this ordinance is the responsibility of the County Health Department. There is seemingly no enforcement of the ordinance, as garbage containers are dumped over repeatedly by bears. Alberton ordinances apply only within the town limits. Subdivisions being developed adjacent to but outside the town limits have no ordinances.

The State of Montana has an *Unlawful Supplemental Feeding* regulation to prevent the feeding of wildlife. In theory, it might be possible to cite citizens under this regulation who willingly allow bears to acquire food attractants on their property. This use of the regulation has not been tested.

One of the steps identified in the process of becoming a Bear Smart Community is the development of local direction requiring the securing of bear attractants. If it is found in the future that voluntary compliance with well-established methods for securing attractants is insufficient, Alberton may need to review and update its ordinances in order to become a Bear Smart Community. Likewise, Mineral County may need to initiate attractant storage guidance in its zoning ordinances and other direction.

## Next steps

With this Assessment as a basis, the Bear Smart Alberton Working Group can develop a plan for addressing the identified sources of bear-human conflict within the community. The plan should include, as a minimum, the following components.

- Initiate a public information and education program to better inform citizens about the need and methods for securing attractants from bears.
- Refine the prioritization of attractants and develop projects to address the attractants in priority order.
- Develop and implement a system for seeking grants or other funds to conduct projects on a cost share or partnership basis with citizens, government, and NGOs.

- Work with local governments to ensure adequate direction is in place to secure bear attractants and to enforce the direction.
- Continue to monitor bear-human conflicts in the community to determine effectiveness of the above measures.

### **Disclaimer**

The Bear Smart Alberton Working Group produced this Community Assessment in good faith using the best available information. No liability is assumed by the Working Group or any of its members with respect to the use and application of information in this document.