

Rico Community Bear Meeting with Colorado Parks and Wildlife

Speakers: Matt Sturdevant, District Wildlife Officer for the Dolores and Rico area, based out of Durango. Jamin Grigg, Regional Wildlife Biologist for Southwest Colorado, based out of Durango.

Format: Informal presentation with open community questions throughout.

About this document: This is a cleaned-up account of a roughly two and a half hour meeting, rebuilt from an audio transcript.

SUMMARY

- **Secure attractants, every day, all year:** trash, bird feeders, compost, pet food, fallen fruit, and locked homes and vehicles.
- **Keep your car and home doors locked** during bear season.
- **Report every bear to CPW directly:** calling does not mean the bear dies, and early reports are what allow a bear to be moved rather than killed. Rico shows only about 4 logged incidents this year.
 - **Call 911 in an emergency**
 - **If not an emergency, call the Durango CPW office: 970-247-0855 x 2 or (970)-247-BEAR (2327)**
- **Haze as a community:** bears need to see and fear people. Do not photograph or tolerate bears in town.
- **Push for bear-proof shared containers** and a municipal CPW bear grant application (matching funds required).
- **Fines for inaction, Rico ordinance:** \$50 first offense, \$150 second offense, third offense is a summons to Municipal Court.
- **Fines for inaction, state luring law:** up to \$5,000 by a third offense, and any law enforcement officer can write the citation.
- **The real cost:** a fed bear is a dead bear. Any bear that enters an occupied home is euthanized.

Part One: What Was Said

Why the meeting happened

The meeting was called by residents, not by the state. The framing at the opening was that bear conflict is a human problem before it is a bear problem, and that Rico has enough collective experience with it now to manage it productively if the community acts together.

Matt Sturdevant opened by making clear that he is the officer on the ground here. When Rico calls with a bear problem, he is generally the one who responds. He asked that the evening be treated as a conversation rather than a presentation, and both he and Jamin Grigg took questions continuously.

The statewide picture

Colorado is in year two of what Jamin Grigg described as a total natural food failure for bears, and this year is worse than last year. Two factors combined. The state is in its second year of severe drought. On top of that, an unusually warm spring pushed everything into bloom well ahead of schedule, and a hard freeze then killed it off.

The result is that the entire acorn crop failed statewide. Chokecherries, raspberries, serviceberries, and snowberries were lost as well. There is effectively no soft mast crop this year. Mushrooms, another food source bears rely on, were nearly absent, though recent rain has started to produce a few.

With almost nothing available on the landscape, bears are moving into towns. Statewide, CPW has already more than doubled the previous record high for bear conflicts, and the year is not over.

What bears are doing right now, and why

Bears are in hyperphagia, the pre-hibernation feeding period. A bear in this state is trying to consume on the order of 20,000 calories a day and is feeding roughly 20 to 23 hours a day. The goal is to put on somewhere between two and five pounds a day before denning.

That biological pressure is what overrides a bear's normal wariness of people. In a normal year, a bear will work the edges of a town and avoid the center. In a year with no food, the calculation changes. The bear does not particularly want to be on a residential street, but it has to eat, and there is nothing to eat anywhere else.

How a bear becomes a problem bear

The phrase both officers came back to is that a fed bear is a dead bear.

The progression is predictable. A bear tips one trash can and gets rewarded. It comes back, and if not to that can then to the neighbor's. It works its way down the street. From trash it moves to vehicles, because a car interior smells strongly of people and food. From vehicles it moves to homes. Once a bear enters an occupied dwelling, CPW considers it a

dangerous bear, and that bear will be euthanized. There is no version of that story where the bear is relocated.

Matt described a case in Rico from about four years ago where a bear had already broken into three vehicles and three homes before anyone called him. He also described the current state of the town bluntly. A dominant boar had essentially claimed Rico as his territory and was walking down the middle of the street at two in the afternoon, indifferent to people. That bear was euthanized two or three weeks before the meeting, just up the street from where the meeting was held.

The habit also gets taught. There are currently two sows with cubs in town, and what those cubs are learning is that Rico is where the food is, that specific houses have the best garbage, and that people are harmless. Those cubs will carry that behavior into adulthood. In Dolores, a bear that was effectively born in town was relocated into the mountains and was back in town inside of about a week.

The consequences of unsecured trash are not only behavioral. Matt referenced recent news coverage of a bear found lethargic and unable to walk. Officers euthanized it, and the necropsy found its intestines completely blocked with plastic bags, trash bags, and diapers.

Durango is the worst case in the region and is, in Matt's words, ground zero. A bear study that began there in 2004 collared and tracked bears as cubs and yearlings. Animals from that study, not seen in town for twenty years, are now showing up in Durango. That is a measure of how severe this year is. Durango has also produced the region's most alarming incident, a woman who was attacked by a bear that came through her window while she was sleeping.

Securing attractants

The core message is that this is not a bad-year practice. It is a permanent practice that the community has to run every year.

Trash has to be secured all of the time, without exception. Compost piles are an attractant and should not be maintained. Homes need to be locked, including windows. Vehicles need to be locked, and vehicle break-ins have already happened in Rico. Matt noted that he has watched bears systematically test every window on a house as they move along it, and that lever handles and standard doorknobs are both within a bear's ability to open.

Bird feeders come down. That was Matt's single strongest specific ask.

Pet food outdoors is a serious problem. Matt described a 1 a.m. call about a bear on a porch, a follow-up call at 4 a.m. after the bear returned, and a homeowner who would not remove his outdoor cat food because he felt the cats needed to eat. The workable answer is to feed pets for one hour a day, then take the food up and store it indoors, and clean up anything spilled.

One resident raised a fruit tree in town that is currently loaded with apples and has a sow and two cubs feeding in it. The response was to remove the apples from the tree.

The new state law and the town ordinance

Colorado now has a statute covering the luring of bears. As Matt described it, the law applies to a person who knowingly places food or edible waste in the open in circumstances where there is a reasonable probability of luring a bear. The practical effect is that a resident who has already been warned, and who continues to leave trash unsecured, is now clearly on the hook.

Rico's own town ordinance requires secured trash and carries a fine of \$50 for the first offense and \$150 for the second offense, with a third offense resulting in a summons to appear in Municipal Court. The state penalties escalate to \$5,000 for a third offense. Any law enforcement officer in the state can write these citations, since it is a statute rather than a local rule.

Matt was direct that he will not be the town's trash police. He does not have the time or the coverage. He sees the value of the law as backing up education and giving the community leverage, not as an enforcement program he will run.

Hazing, and what actually works

Asked what hazing means, Matt's answer was short. The bear has to see people and fear people. Right now the sows in Rico are teaching their cubs the opposite.

Hazing works best early, before a bear has decided a town belongs to it. His assessment of Rico is that the town let this go too long and now has a hard road, because the animals currently here have already made the town their own. The window to change a bear's behavior cheaply is the first time it shows up, not the tenth.

On specific hazing tools:

Paintball guns are recommended and are something residents can use. The sting is comparable to a wasp. Aim for the shoulders, chest, neck, rump, and heavy muscle. Never aim at the head or face, both because of the risk of eye injury and because a bear that is already leaving and gets hit in the head will turn back toward the impact. CPW now uses pepper-filled paintballs; Matt did not know whether those are available to the public and suggested researching it.

Rubber buckshot and rubber slugs are legal in Colorado. Matt has loaned rubber buckshot to one resident in Rico who has used it here. He is not willing to distribute it generally, and any use needs to be coordinated with him and with the town marshal, because of the obvious risk of people getting trigger happy on a residential street.

Beanbag rounds are used by CPW but are not a guarantee. Matt described shooting a bear at close range with a beanbag, getting no reaction, firing three more rounds, and having the

bear square up at him instead of leaving. That bear was euthanized, because a bear that cannot be hazed cannot be corrected.

Bear spray is effective when used properly. It is high pressure and throws a stream, so it covers far more area than personal pepper spray, but it is still a close-range tool. You need to practice with it, and you need to be aware of wind direction, because spraying into the wind will dose you instead of the bear. As a surface deterrent it is not useful. The residue is oily, it degrades with rain, and anyone who later touches a sprayed surface and then touches their eyes or skin will regret it.

Rocks, yelling, and flashlights will move a lone or timid bear and are worth doing. They will not move a bear that has already claimed the town. Whistles were raised twice and were not endorsed as adequate protection.

The consistent theme is that hazing only works if the town does it as a unit. A handful of households pushing bears out while others tolerate or photograph them does not change bear behavior. Matt also pushed back on the cultural piece directly. A bear standing in the middle of town is not a photo opportunity. It is a large predator that has lost its fear of people, and treating it as charming is what produces the situation Rico is in now.

Community-scale fixes

Both officers pointed at infrastructure as the highest-leverage change available to Rico.

The target is bear-proof containment, not bear-resistant containment. Those are different products and only one of them actually works.

Centralized collection came up repeatedly. Rather than every household maintaining an individual can, a street or a neighborhood can share a bear-proof dumpster, with something like a two-bag-per-household weekly allowance. Matt suggested negotiating this directly with the hauler, whose Rico route would drop from a couple of hours of picking up individual cans to roughly thirty minutes, which is worth asking for a discount over.

He also relayed a solution from another community meeting. A resident built an electric fence enclosure at the end of his street, four or five strands, and the whole street put their carts inside it. Before that, nearly every can on the street was being tipped. After, nothing was touched for two months. Rico does not appear to have an ordinance against electric fencing, though state law requires it to be signed as electrified.

A resident raised a third model, a trash association operating west of Norwood. It is open a few hours a day, several days a week, and residents haul their own trash and pay roughly five or six dollars per container rather than paying monthly for pickup. Jamin Grigg noted that centralized drop sites work well in other communities, with the caveat that they require an attendant, because otherwise people will leave mattresses and televisions. A town representative present confirmed that centralized trash options are actively being investigated and that options will be brought to the town government and the community when there is enough to present.

The funding path for all of this is a CPW bear grant program. Money is available every year and often goes unclaimed. Applications come from the municipality, typically through the town manager or town council, not from individuals or individual businesses. Dolores received roughly 23 bear-proof receptacles, Rico received three, and the Cortez airport received two. The last time Rico participated, piggybacking on the Dolores application, was 2022. Durango has received substantial grant funding for its receptacles and also used grant money to fund a dedicated resource officer whose job included checking trash containers. Matt's point was that the scope is flexible and the town should think broadly about what it asks for. The town representative noted that these grants generally require matching funds, which the town would need to plan for.

Asked directly how long it would take to fix this if the community locked everything down starting tonight, Matt's estimate was one to two years. Bears will keep checking, but a bear that finds no food has no reason to stay and does not have the energy to waste on a dead area.

Why feeding stations are not an option

A resident asked whether the community could set up feeding stations outside of town to keep bears fed and away from houses.

Jamin Grigg's answer was that Colorado does not do this. Feeding removes what is left of the animal's wildness. It creates permanent dependency, because the day the feed station stops, those bears go looking for the next reliable source, which is town. It degrades the bears' ability to forage for themselves. It also fails on its own terms for bears specifically, because a dominant male will take over the site and will try to kill other bears that come to it.

CPW does occasionally feed wildlife, but only deer and elk, and only in winters severe enough to threaten a mass die-off.

Reporting, which is the thing Rico is getting wrong

This was the most actionable part of the meeting.

The misconception that stops people from calling is the belief that calling CPW means the bear dies. Both officers addressed that directly. Trapping is simply how a bear is handled safely. It is not synonymous with euthanasia. A bear caught early, before it has caused damage or broken into anything, can in many cases be moved back into the mountains. A bear reported late, after it has escalated to vehicles and homes, cannot.

Every reported incident becomes a pin on a statewide map that CPW leadership uses to allocate attention and resources. Rico currently shows roughly four incidents for the year. Durango shows hundreds. Montezuma and Dolores County recorded about 130. When Matt asks his supervisor for authorization to set a trap in Rico, the map is what his supervisor looks at, and the map currently says Rico does not have a problem.

Reports also build the narrative that justifies action. Matt walked through how he makes the case internally. The bear hit this trash can, that household corrected it, the neighbor corrected it, then it moved a street over, then it got into a vehicle. That documented progression is what gets a trap approved while the bear is still salvageable.

On practical cadence, he was clear that residents do not need to call in every individual sighting every day. Batching works. Three sightings this week and the bear is not leaving is a useful report. Detail matters more than frequency. Describe the animal well enough to distinguish it, for example a cinnamon-colored sow with two cubs roughly half her size, one with a white chest mark, seen behind a specific building at a specific time.

Both officers also endorsed the town keeping its own running log or forum thread of bear descriptions and sightings. That lets residents tell known animals from a new bear arriving, which changes the response.

One caution worth noting. In the four-year-old case Matt described, the homeowner had not called CPW at all, he had called an informal local contact. Informal channels do not create a record, and the record is what drives the response.

Bear biology, territory, and winter

Bears are territorial, particularly males. A dominant boar will push subadult males out of an area and may kill them if he gets the chance. Males will also kill cubs that are not their own, and they can tell the difference by scent, which makes town a genuinely dangerous place for cubs.

Those territorial rules break down where food is concentrated. Jamin Grigg noted that Durango likely has hundreds of bears within town at times this year. Bears are risk averse and avoid fights when they can, so where food is abundant they will tolerate each other.

On population, the measurement unit is a large geographic area rather than a town, because bear territories are large and shift year to year with the food. The relevant area here is everything west of the Animas River and south of roughly the Lizard Head divide, running out through Hermosa Creek, the Glade, McPhee Reservoir, and Dove Creek to the Utah line. CPW estimates 1,200 to 1,500 bears in that area. The population is probably at a lower point right now after two years of drought and food failure, even though conflicts have risen sharply.

Bears should hibernate through winter, but a hungry bear will come out. Snow acts as insulation. In a good snow year the den stays warmer and the bear burns less energy, so it stays down. In a low-snow winter like the last one, the den runs colder, the bear burns more energy, gets hungry, and becomes active. The condition the bear was in when it denned matters too. A bear that went into the den underfed in a snowless winter is the one that reappears in February.

Dens are typically under boulders or cliff faces, and bears will use small spaces. They sometimes reuse the same dens. If you are snowshoeing and see a small melted hole venting warm air, that may be an active den.

Pets

A dog in a fenced yard can work as a deterrent.

A dog off leash on a trail is a serious hazard. The dog chases the bear, the bear chases the dog, and the dog brings the bear straight back to you. A woman north of Durango was killed in exactly that sequence a few years ago. She was walking with small dogs, they ran into a sow with cubs, the dogs took off after them, the sow defended her cubs, and the dogs led her back to their owner.

Bears will kill and eat a cat if they can catch one. They are generally not interested in dogs, with small dogs being a possible exception.

Encounters on foot

Most bad encounters happen because someone surprised a bear, and the worst version is ending up between a sow and her cubs.

Matt's own encounter came while hunting, moving quietly, when he came around a corner on two cubs at very close range. The sow charged. What he did was avoid direct eye contact, keep her in his peripheral vision, and back away slowly. She charged again after he was out of her sight line, at which point he left quickly. Eye contact matters. Looking a bear in the eye reads as a challenge, and he demonstrates this with trapped bears, which will hit the cage when stared at.

His general guidance for this particular year was to take every precaution, keep dogs leashed, carry bear spray and consider carrying a firearm, and be willing to change habits and routes. Rico is currently living in close quarters with wildlife, and he suggested treating it that way.

A separate local incident underlined the point. A sow charged an older Rico resident in broad daylight. He walks with ski poles and has MS. He struck her on the nose, she broke off, and he was, in Matt's assessment, extremely lucky. Cubs were almost certainly nearby even though he never saw them.

How to reach CPW

For an emergency, including a bear inside a house, call 911. Dispatch contacts CPW immediately and an officer will call back within minutes, though the responding officer may be well over an hour away. Matt estimated 45 minutes to reach Rico when he is available. While waiting, get yourself into a locked room.

During business hours there are two representatives in the Durango office who will take the details.

After hours and on weekends, the office line opens with an automated message that includes a bear hotline option. That is the right channel for non-emergency reports, such as a new bear in town, with a description and location.

There is also a CPW dispatch number, routed through state dispatch out of Montrose, for situations that are urgent but not 911 emergencies.

Matt gave out his direct cell number and left cards. The critical instruction is to leave a voicemail or a text. He carries a government phone that receives constant spam, and he does not return unknown numbers with no message. Leave your name, your location, the nature of the problem, your address, and a callback number. He is in the field for most of hunting season and often out of service, so responses may come late at night. He confirmed he is fine with his card being posted on the local Facebook page.

For context on his coverage, the area runs about eight officers at present against a normal complement of twelve, across a region roughly the size of Connecticut, with two officers covering this end of it. An officer is on call 24 hours a day, every day of the year, rotating roughly every nine days.

Closing

Matt's one takeaway, when asked for it directly, was that CPW is not the enemy in this. He is available, he wants the calls, and he would rather correct a bear's behavior early than kill it later. He will also tell you to take your bird feeders down.

Jamin Grigg's closing point was about peer pressure. Where one household on a street is attracting bears and everyone else is doing the work, community pressure on that household is genuinely effective and is one of the few tools that works at the scale the problem operates at.

Both were explicit that CPW does not want to kill bears. Euthanasia is the worst part of the job. The only reliable way to avoid it is to know about a bear early enough to change its behavior.

He also recommended a documentary on the Durango bear research, available at bearsofdurango.com.

Part Two: Reference Summary

Current conditions

- Colorado is in year two of a near-total natural food failure for bears, and this year is worse than last.
- Causes are two years of severe drought, an unusually warm spring that triggered early bloom, and a hard freeze that killed the bloom off.

- The statewide acorn crop failed entirely. Chokecherries, raspberries, serviceberries, and snowberries were lost. Mushrooms were nearly absent until recent rains.
- Statewide bear conflicts have already more than doubled the previous all-time record.
- Estimated population in the surrounding region, west of the Animas River and south of the Lizard Head divide out to the Utah line, is 1,200 to 1,500 bears, probably trending lower after two drought years even as conflicts rise.

Bear behavior right now

- Bears are in hyperphagia. Target intake is roughly 20,000 calories a day, feeding 20 to 23 hours a day, gaining two to five pounds a day.
- Hunger is currently overriding their natural avoidance of people.
- A bear that gets one food reward will return, close to 100 percent of the time, to that can or a neighbor's.
- The escalation path is trash, then vehicles, then homes.
- A bear that enters an occupied dwelling will be euthanized. There is no relocation option at that stage.
- Sows in town are actively teaching cubs that town is a food source and that people are harmless. Rico currently has two sows with cubs doing this.
- Relocation of a town-habituated bear frequently fails. A Dolores bear was back in town about a week after being moved.
- Bears will test windows and doors and can operate both lever handles and standard doorknobs.

Securing attractants, the checklist

- Secure trash every day, all year, not only in bad food years.
- Do not keep compost piles.
- Take bird feeders down.
- Feed pets indoors, or feed outdoors for one hour only, then remove and store the food and clean up spills.
- Lock house doors and windows, including at night in warm weather.
- Lock vehicles. Vehicle break-ins have already occurred in Rico.

- Clean up fallen fruit. A loaded apple tree in town is currently drawing a sow and two cubs.
- Target bear-proof containment, not bear-resistant.

The law

- Colorado statute now covers knowingly placing food or edible waste in the open where there is a reasonable probability of luring a bear.
- Penalties escalate with repeat offenses, into the low thousands of dollars by a third offense. Exact figures should be confirmed with CPW before publication.
- Rico's town ordinance requires secured trash and carries a fine of roughly fifty dollars.
- Any law enforcement officer in the state can write a citation under the statute.
- CPW will not act as the town's trash police. The statute is intended to back up education and community pressure.

Hazing

- The objective is that bears see people and fear people.
- Hazing is most effective the first time a bear appears, and much less effective once a bear has claimed a town.
- It only works if the whole community participates.
- Paintball guns are recommended for residents. Aim at shoulders, chest, neck, rump, and heavy muscle. Never the head or face.
- Pepper-filled paintballs are used by CPW. Public availability is unconfirmed.
- Rubber buckshot and rubber slugs are legal in Colorado but must be coordinated with the local officer and the town marshal. CPW will not distribute them generally.
- Bear spray is effective at close range, throws a stream, and requires practice. Never spray into the wind. It is not useful as a surface deterrent, and the oily residue will burn anyone who later touches it and then their eyes or skin.
- Rocks, shouting, and lights will move a timid or lone bear but will not move an established one.
- Whistles were not endorsed as adequate protection.
- Photographing a bear in town rather than driving it off is part of the problem.

Reporting, the priority action for Rico

- Calling CPW does not mean the bear will be killed. That misconception is the main reason Rico is underreporting.
- Trapping is a handling method, not a death sentence. Bears caught early can often be relocated. Bears reported after they have entered homes cannot.
- Rico has roughly four logged incidents this year. Durango has hundreds. Montezuma and Dolores County recorded about 130. CPW leadership allocates resources off that map.
- Report sightings and incidents. Batching is acceptable, for example three sightings this week and the bear is not leaving.
- Include detail: color, size, number of cubs, distinguishing marks, location, time, and behavior.
- Keep a town log or forum thread of bear descriptions so residents can distinguish known bears from new arrivals.
- Report to CPW directly. Informal local channels do not create the record that drives a response.

Community infrastructure and funding

- Centralized bear-proof dumpsters shared by a street or neighborhood, with a per-household bag allowance, is the most frequently recommended fix.
- Negotiate with the hauler. Consolidating cuts the Rico route from hours to roughly thirty minutes and is worth asking for a discount over.
- Electric fence enclosures for shared carts have worked elsewhere. One street reported zero tipped cans in two months. State law requires the fence to be signed as electrified.
- A staffed drop-site model exists west of Norwood, open limited hours, with residents hauling their own trash for roughly five or six dollars per container. Any drop site needs an attendant to prevent illegal dumping of mattresses and appliances.
- The town has confirmed that centralized trash options are under active investigation.
- CPW bear grants are available annually and frequently go unclaimed. Applications come from the municipality, through the town manager or council, not from individuals or businesses.

- Prior awards in the area: about 23 receptacles to Dolores, three to Rico, two to the Cortez airport. Rico last participated in 2022. Durango has received substantial receptacle funding and also grant-funded a dedicated resource officer to check containers.
- Grants generally require matching funds.
- Feeding stations outside of town are not permitted and do not work. They create permanent dependency, destroy foraging behavior, and concentrate territorial conflict, since a dominant male will take the site over and kill other bears at it.
- If the town locked down every attractant starting now, the estimated timeline for bears to move on is one to two years.

Pets and hiking

- A dog in a fenced yard can deter bears.
- Never hike with a dog off leash. The dog will chase the bear and bring it back to you. A woman north of Durango was killed in exactly this sequence.
- Bears will kill and eat cats. They are generally not interested in dogs, with small dogs a possible exception.
- Make noise on the trail. Surprise encounters are when people get hurt.
- Carry bear spray, know how to use it, and consider a firearm.
- If you encounter a bear, avoid direct eye contact, which reads as a challenge. Watch it peripherally, back away slowly, and get out of its sight line before moving faster.
- The worst position is between a sow and her cubs. Assume cubs are nearby whenever you see a sow.
- A sow charged an older Rico resident in broad daylight this season. He drove her off by striking her nose with a ski pole and was fortunate.

Winter

- Bears should hibernate, but hungry bears will emerge.
- Snow insulates the den. Good snow years keep bears down because they burn less energy. Low-snow winters push them back out.
- A bear that denned underfed in a snowless winter is the one that reappears mid-winter.

- Dens are under boulders and cliff faces, often reused. A small melted vent hole in snow may indicate an active den.

Contacting CPW

- **Emergency, including a bear in a house:** call 911. An officer will call back within minutes. Response time to Rico can be 45 minutes or more. Lock yourself in a room while waiting.
- **Business hours:** the Durango office line, staffed by two representatives.
- **After hours and weekends:** the office line's automated menu includes a bear hotline option for non-emergency reports.
- **Urgent but not 911:** the CPW dispatch number, routed through state dispatch out of Montrose.
- **Direct cell:** Matt Sturdevant left cards. Always leave a voicemail or text. He will not return an unknown number with no message, because the government phone receives heavy spam. Include your name, location, address, the problem, and a callback number. He is frequently out of service during hunting season and may return calls late at night.
- He confirmed his card can be posted on the local Facebook page.
- Coverage context: roughly eight officers against a normal twelve, over an area about the size of Connecticut, with two covering this end. An officer is on call 24 hours a day, year round, rotating roughly every nine days.

Further resource

- bearsofdurango.com. A documentary covering the Durango bear research and the broader conflict issue, available to rent.