

2,357 ATTACKS IN 20 YEARS: CALM ASIATIC BLACK BEARS ON A SHORT FUSE IN KASHMIR

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GUWAHATI:

The Kashmir Valley has bucked the trend of Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) attacks on humans rarely reported throughout the animal's global range, a new study has revealed.

The conversion of the bear's natural habitat to orchards and farmlands is the primary reason for the ursine attacks over the past 30 years. Other reasons include the India-Pakistan border fencing which blocks the movement of the animal and a new generation of people who are not familiar with co-existing with large predators.

Asiatic black bear. Photo: Special Arrangement

On the brighter side – not necessarily for the bears – cases of such attacks have declined since 2016, the paper published in the latest edition of the *Journal of Threatened Taxa* said.

The study has been authored by Aaliya Mir, Shanmugavelu Swaminathan, Rashid Y. Naqash, Thomas Sharp and Attur Shanmugam Arun. All of them are members of the non-profit Wildlife SOS except for Mr. Naqash, who is with Jammu and Kashmir's Wildlife Protection Department established in 1978 and is equivalent to the wildlife wing of Forest Departments.

According to the study, Asiatic black bear attacks are rare across the globe, unlike the Kashmir Valley where attacks have been relatively common over the past 20-30 years. It cites data maintained by Jammu and Kashmir's Wildlife Protection Department.

The department recorded 2,357 Asiatic black bear attacks in the Valley between 2000 and 2020. A total of 2,243 attacks or 95.2% of the cases resulted in injury and 114 attacks or 4.8% of cases in death.

The highest number of reported attacks in a single year was 282, including 10 deaths, in 2010. While 42.4% of all the documented attacks were reported as grievous, 1.2% caused permanent disability, the study said.

“There are several causes for the high number of attacks, though the foremost reason likely stems from the conversion of natural habitat to orchards and agricultural fields. Attracted to fruits and nuts, the Asiatic black bears actively raid orchards and agricultural areas putting them into close proximity to humans,” the study said.

Most of the documented attacks occurred from July through November, coinciding with the harvesting season, and occurred the least from December through March when the Asiatic black bears usually hibernate. The victims of bear attacks were most often working in farms or orchards, and a majority were between 31 and 40 years.

The frequency of attacks has declined since 2016, which could be attributed to retaliatory killings, better management by the Wildlife Department, and the engagement of NGOs with local people to create awareness about bears and teach safety measures.

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