

Desolation Wilderness News: Food Canisters Required for Backpackers

Effective Monday, July 18, 2022, overnight visitors to Desolation Wilderness are required to store their food and trash in a canister designed to prevent access by bears.

Forest orders were recently signed by forest supervisors from Eldorado National Forest and Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, the agencies tasked with management of Desolation Wilderness. Their purpose is to protect lives of bears and visitors to Desolation Wilderness.

In recent years, bears have become more aggressive in their search for food, relying on human sources rather than natural sources. This causes increased interactions between humans and bears and the possibility of bears becoming habituated to the presence of humans. A person who fights back or gets between the bear and food is risking bodily injury or death. In cases where a bear is known to repeatedly threaten or intimidate visitors, or cause injury, the bear may be euthanized.

When a bear gets human food, it creates a mess with food packaging torn up and left scattered in campsites and along lakeshores. Sometimes bears eat the packaging along with the food. Rangers have observed food wrappers with bar codes in bear scat.

Backpackers at Lake Aloha, Gilmore Lake, and other popular camping areas in Desolation Wilderness have lost as many as ten "bear hangs" a night to bears in recent years. Visitors are left with no food. To continue their backpacking trips, many of these groups must hike out of the wilderness to get more food.

Typical methods of food and trash storage are no longer effective as wildlife has grown accustomed to humans. Whistles, banging pots and pans, yelling, nothing is working. Bears have adapted to even the most experienced campers' food hangs and brought them down.

One of the principles of Leave No Trace is to respect wildlife. Considerate campers observe wildlife from a distance, store food securely and keep garbage and food scraps away from animals. A camper would be wise to check his or her tent for food in pockets, candy wrappers, and the like.

Backpackers can rent a bear canister at the Placerville Ranger Station when they get their permit. For more information on rental, call (530) 647-5415. They can also purchase a canister at a recreational outlet. Most bear canisters sold at retail recreational stores are highly bear-resistant.

Backpackers who are not in compliance with the forest order will be in violation of 36 C.F.R. § 261.58(cc) and are subject to be cited and fined.

The complete texts of Forest Orders 03-22-11 and 19-22-05 can be found at www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado and www.fs.usda.gov/ltbmu .

Frequently asked questions

What is a “canister designed to prevent access by bears”?

Hard-sided canisters are commercially produced and designed to prevent access by bears. Bear-resistant canisters and panniers are the most effective method of food storage for wilderness travelers. Throughout the region, use of bear-resistant canisters is strongly recommended. In Desolation Wilderness it is mandatory to store food and refuse in a canister designed to prevent access by bear as of July 18, 2022.

Other food storage options like “odor proof” bags, or chew resistant bags, while great in many places, are not effective in Desolation Wilderness.

Do day users need to carry a canister?

Typically, people not spending the night will not need to carry a canister. Think about whether you will be able to always stay within arms-reach of your food. If you plan to swim, or leave your pack behind while skiing or climbing, or some other situation, you must store your food in a canister.

Do I need a canister during the winter?

Yes, canisters are required year-round.

Can I hike with overnight equipment across Desolation Wilderness in a day and not carry a canister?

Please carry a bear canister. It is the right thing to do, especially around Lake Tahoe and in the Sierra Nevada. Your responsibility to protect bears does not end at the Desolation Wilderness boundary, nor do the problems associated with human-food habituated bears. Lake Tahoe is struggling with people poorly protecting their food from bears. Help be a part of the solution.

In some places, if you have overnight equipment such as a tent or sleeping bag, you must comply with overnight and bear canister regulations even if you hope to not sleep in the area. For now, this is not the case in Desolation Wilderness. We will caution you that the 26 miles of Pacific Crest Trail between Echo Lake and Richardson Lake are hard to do in a day and bears continue to actively obtain food from hikers north of the Desolation Wilderness boundary. Camping early is strictly not allowed if you do not have a canister.

What needs to be stored in a canister?

Items that must be secured include food sealed in jars, cans, or foil packs. Non-food items such as plastic bottles, water bottles, coffee mugs, pet food, empty cans, trash, wrappers, cosmetics, grocery bags, boxes, and ice chests must also be secured. Do not leave these items in your car or tent. Bears will break in to obtain them.

How can I report a bear related incident?

For reporting an incident visitors can call the Placerville Ranger Station at 530-647-5415 or the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit at 530-543-2600.