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# Near Lake Tahoe There's a Bear So Tough, Bullets Bounce Off His Head

*'Bubba' Is Blamed for at Least 50 Home Invasions and His Crime Spree Isn't Over*

By [MARIE C. BACA](#)

INCLINE VILLAGE, Nev.—In hot pursuit of a notorious burglar along the shores of Lake Tahoe this year, Carl Lackey organized a night patrol to catch the perp. His tools included a fire extinguisher, pepper spray and two dogs that respond only to commands in Russian.

"These dogs were bred to hunt," says Mr. Lackey, 45 years old.



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Associated Press

Bears are increasingly seen in populated areas around Lake Tahoe. Above left, a bear in South Lake Tahoe found leftovers from Memorial Day in 2007.

## In Search of Bubba the Bear

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A 700-pound black bear known as Bubba is accused of breaking into at least 50 homes around Lake Tahoe. WSJ's Marie Baca reports on the elusive ursine bandit.



Mr. Lackey's nemesis: a 700-pound black bear dubbed Bubba.

The bear has been a longtime target for Mr. Lackey, a biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife. Recently, his quest search took on greater urgency.

Driven from the mountains by the 2009-2010 winter—the snowiest in five years—and feeding off the garbage left by tourists, Bubba is living large on Lake Tahoe's shores. The bear has broken into at least 50 homes in search of food the past year, causing more than \$70,000 of damage, and leaving stinky, basketball-size deposits as his calling card.

So Mr. Lackey has ramped up his bear-catching techniques, deviating from his usual strategy of just laying traps by going on 3 a.m. patrols. This past winter, he placed a shoot-to-kill order, declaring Bubba dangerous and saying the bear "needs to go out of the population."

Bubba isn't the only bear on a tear. Across California and Nevada, last year's harsh winter forced bears across California and Nevada down from the mountains in search of food.

In May, Mr. Lackey says one bear killed eight sheep and goats in a single incident in Carson City, Nev. That same month, he says, another bear broke into a garage in Gardnerville, Nev., and got stuck in a Mercedes, surprising the car's owner when he found the vehicle occupied the next morning.

And in July in Yosemite National Park, bears caused \$67,915 of damage in just one week by raiding parking lots, campgrounds and other areas, according to the National Park Service. In comparison, last year bears caused only an average of \$1,500 in damage per week.



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Associated Press

A cub in a convertible in Stateline, Nev., in 2006.

At Lake Tahoe, Mr. Lackey and other biologists have killed 13 bears so far this year, triple the normal average by August. Bubba, double the size of the average adult black bear, has proven remarkably elusive.

Some of Bubba's exploits and escapes are the stuff of legend. In one incident in mid-2009, a bear matching Bubba's description confronted a frightened homeowner, who told officials that he shot the bear between the eyes with a .44 Magnum. The bullet apparently bounced off the bear's skull, leaving him wounded but still alive, Mr. Lackey says.

Bubba and his pals have their sympathizers. The Bear League, a nonprofit bear-safety organization, says techniques like sounding air horns could be used instead of lethal ones. Executive director Ann Bryant says government agencies like Mr. Lackey's dispatch animals far too often in

order to be seen as "heroes."

"We don't believe it's appropriate to just start killing bears for following their noses to food," says Ms. Bryant.

Mr. Lackey makes no apologies. "We value every bear's life, obviously, but when they're breaking into homes, breaking into cars, doing that kind of damage, they're a public safety threat," he says.

Thus the late-night patrols with his two Karelian dogs, Stryker and Rooster, who are trained to chase bears up trees where they can then be tranquilized or exterminated.

Mr. Lackey got Stryker in 2001 from a breeder in Montana; Rooster is Stryker's son. Mr. Lackey says he addresses them in Russian because they are "unique dogs, and they deserve a unique command." Using Russian also avoids the possibility of confusing other nearby dogs, he says.

Mr. Lackey joined the Nevada Department of Wildlife in 1993 after graduating from the University of Nevada at Reno with a degree in renewable natural resources and an emphasis on wildlife management. His job largely consists of responding to bear incidents, as well as tagging the bruins with colored tags to determine how the population is changing.

Mr. Lackey's quest for Bubba began in late 2007 when locals began reporting seeing an "enormous" bear breaking into trash cans. At first, he was skeptical. "People who see a bear at night tend to describe the animal as being bigger than it is in real life," he says.

A few months later it became clearer the same bear was showing up time and again. In addition to some markings, its method of attack is consistent. Bubba-related incidents are easily identified by a garage door that appears "punched in," says Mr. Lackey.

Over the next two years, he set traps. That wasn't enough, however.

Last year, Bubba incidents began accelerating partly because of the weather, and partly because the recovering tourism economy brought more people—and trash—into the area.

Last Thanksgiving, Bubba broke into a Presbyterian church in Incline Village and devoured more than 20 jars of peanut butter that were to be given to the poor, among other things. Rev. Dick Randall, pastor of the Village Church, emailed the congregation and asked them to pray for the bear to be relocated, rather than killed.

"I just wanted to be Christian about it," says Rev. Randall.

Recently, Mr. Lackey has been spending his free time brainstorming new ways to catch Bubba. That's fine with his wife Heather, a former rattlesnake extractor who owns Carson Creature Catchers, a nuisance-wildlife-control company based in Carson City.

"It just seems normal to us," says Mrs. Lackey, 36, adding that hunting an elusive animal like Bubba can be extremely challenging. "I spend my time chasing skunks and bats, so I know how frustrating it can be."

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