

Bear Safety for Tree Planters

Most people do not know what to do to avoid bears or what to do if they run into one. As a tree planter working in prime bear habitat, you have a greater probability of encountering a bear. Do you know how to act to decrease your likelihood of an unpleasant encounter with a bear? In order to be safe, you need to have an understanding of bears and their behaviour. This pamphlet outlines information essential to your safety.

Know About Bears

Your best defense in bear country is your brain – your knowledge and understanding of bears.

Bears are constantly seeking food and will travel great distances to seek out nutritious foods. They are omnivores and eat a varied diet including plants, insects and meat. They have an extraordinary sense of smell and may be attracted from long distances by the smell of food.

Bears are fast and strong. They are capable of speeds of 50 km/hr. – far faster than any human. They often flip large rocks or smash logs seeking a meal of insect larvae.

Avoid Surprising Bears

One of your primary goals when traveling in bear country is to avoid surprising a bear. Whenever you are traveling you should make noise to warn bears of your presence. Talking, singing or regularly calling out identifies you as a non-threatening human. To be effective, the noise you make must be loud enough to let a bear know you are in the area before you get too close. Bear bells are not recommended as they are commonly ignored.

Be especially careful when traveling in thick vegetation, into the wind or along creeks or streams, where bears are less likely to hear your approach. On hot days, bears may be resting in shady and cool areas such as near streams or under thick vegetation.

Stay Alert

You also need to stay alert and aware of your surroundings. Watch for bear signs including droppings, claw and bite marks on trees, logs that have been smashed or torn up, overturned rocks or evidence of digging. If you come across a dead animal, don't stick around. Bears often return repeatedly to a carcass to feed. If a bear finds you near its carcass, it may try to

defend its food source from you. You may smell the foul odour of a carcass before you come across it, see a pile of raked up leaves and dirt, or notice birds such as crows or ravens circling overhead.

The Grizzly and the Black Bear

In British Columbia, we have two species of bears: the black and the grizzly. While the species of bear is not the only factor which should determine your behaviour during an encounter, understanding the differences between these two bears and being able to distinguish them can be important in an encounter situation.

Neither colour nor size are reliable distinguishing features to tell the two species apart. Black bears are often black with a brownish muzzle, while grizzlies tend to have 'grizzled' or lighter tipped hair, but both species are found in a range of colours from blonde (and even white phase black bears) to dark shades. Size is not a dependable characteristic either, as an adult male black bear can easily outweigh a subadult grizzly.

There are a number of reliable features that can be used to distinguish black bears from grizzlies. Grizzlies usually have a prominent hump on their shoulders, while the highest point on a black bear is his rump. Grizzly claws are light in colour and long – about the length of human fingers. Black bears have shorter, dark claws. The profile of the black bear from its nose to forehead is straight whereas the grizzly has a slightly dished profile.

Black and grizzly bears also possess behavioural differences. Black bears evolved in forested areas and are excellent climbers. When threatened, they tend to retreat and seek cover or tree. On the other hand, grizzlies evolved in treeless habitats such as alpine areas where there is little cover. As a result, they have learned to defend themselves in open areas and may respond more aggressively in confrontational situations. But every bear has its own personality and experiences that affects how it responds in any given situation.

Avoid Attracting Bears

A bear's life revolves around the search for food. Thus, if you leave food or garbage around, you are likely to attract a bear and may be responsible for creating safety issues for you, the people who come after you and bears.

BearSmart Camping

Don't camp where there is evidence of bear sign, beside creeks or rivers, or on bear travel routes.

Your camp should be kept clean and free of attractants. Bears are attracted to human food because it tends to be high in calories in comparison to their natural foods. Foods such as bacon, canned fish, fruit and other smelly foods can attract bears from long distances. Do not leave odorous items, including candy bars, beer cans, soap, shampoo or tooth paste in your tent.

Cooking and washing dishes should be done a minimum of 100 m. from your tent. After a meal, all foods should be stored in a bear-proof container or cached in a tree 4 m. above ground and 1 m. out from the trunk and at least 100 m. from your tent. Garbage and toiletries should be stashed as well. Never bury garbage as bears will likely just dig it up. All garbage and leftover food should be packed out.

Bears may also be attracted to petroleum products including rubber, certain plastics, oils and fuels. Store these in a bear-proof location. Current evidence suggests that menstruation does not increase the likelihood of an attack by a black or grizzly bear, but tampons are recommended over pads. They may be disposed of by burning and then packing out the remains.



Portable Electric Fencing

All camps should be surrounded by portable electric fence. If the fence is properly erected and maintained, it is the best way to keep bears out of your camp. It's inexpensive, easy to set up and very effective.

What Should I Do if I See a Black Bear?

Encounters with bears rarely lead to aggressive behaviour and attacks are even rarer. There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to bears, but the following tips may help:

- Remain calm and assess the situation.
- Try to determine whether it is a grizzly or black bear, and whether it is defending cubs or an animal kill, such as an elk or a deer. Bears may 'act' defensively (see below) if startled or if protecting cubs or a food cache.
- If the bear is in the distance, try to make a wide detour or leave the area. Respect the bear's need for space. Never approach a bear, not even for a photo.

If you encounter a bear at close range...

- Ready your deterrent (for example, red pepper spray) and keep your group together.

- Keep your wits intact and trust them.
- Stand your ground. Identify yourself as human by talking in a calm, appeasing tone. You may back away slowly, preferably moving in the direction you came from. Do not run. In most cases, the bear will flee.
- A bear may 'pop' its jaws or swat the ground while blowing or snorting. It may lunge toward you or 'bluff' charge in an attempt to motivate you to leave – usually stopping well short of contact. These are ritualized displays, signalling you are too close. Remain calm and increase your distance from the bear.
- Grizzly mothers may fiercely defend their young, whereas a black bear will usually tree her cubs and try to motivate you to leave by 'acting' aggressively while waiting for the threat to pass. Try to appear non-threatening by remaining still and calm. Back away and leave the area.

If a bear persistently follows you or stalks you...

- Stop! Stand your ground and prepare to use your deterrent or any available improvised weapons such as rocks and sticks.
- Face the bear. Look directly towards it. You might try taking a step or two in the bear's direction to motivate it to back off.
- If the bear continues to follow you, act aggressively toward the bear. Let the bear know you are not easy prey and will fight back if attacked. Shout! Make yourself look as big as possible. Stamp your feet, as you take another step or two toward the bear. Use your deterrent.
- If the bear attacks (physical contact is made), fight for your life. Kick, punch or hit the bear with whatever weapon is available. Concentrate your attack on the face, eyes and nose. Fight any bear that attacks you in a building or tent.

If a mother grizzly actually attacks (physical contact is made) in defense of cubs...

- Use your deterrent and try to back away. Do not act aggressively.
- As a last resort, lie face down and play dead with legs apart and your hands covering the back of your neck. This will let the bear know you are not a threat. It is the best strategy to minimize injury at this point.
- Do not move until the bear has left the area.



If a bear attacks while defending an animal kill...

- Use your deterrent.
- Do not play dead and try not to act aggressively. Back away quickly and get as far away from the food cache as possible.

Remember bears are far more likely to enhance your wilderness experience than spoil it. Knowing how to interpret their behaviour and act responsibly is part of the thrill of sharing forests and mountains with these amazing creatures.

Bear Spray

We recommend carrying bear spray for personal protection. Not all sprays are created equally. Ensure you purchase a product that is intended for use with bears. Carry the spray on your belt and not buried in your pack as you will not have time to look for it. Ready the spray as soon as you see a bear, but only use the spray at close range. If a bear comes within 3 meters of you, spray the bear spray directly at its eyes and nose.

Noise Deterrents

Bangers (deployed from a pistol launcher) may be effective in deterring a bear that has entered your camp or cut block. They must be combined with some sort of human dominance posturing and yelling to be effective. Shot placement should be between you and the bear – never behind the bear. Don't overuse them or the bear will become accustomed to the noise and they will lose their effectiveness. Never use during periods of fire hazard.

Communicate Travel Plans

For your safety, let others know where you are and when you plan to return. Travel in a group whenever possible. Make sure at least one member of a group has a radio. Carry a portable radio when working in isolation.

Caution

The information in this pamphlet is based on the advice and knowledge of specialists with thousands of hours of behavioural observation of bears as well as extensive experience managing bear and human interactions and conflicts. However, no one may be sure what any particular bear will do in any particular situation. For this reason, readers of this pamphlet interact with bears at their own risk. The Get Bear Smart Society accepts no liability for any personal injury or property damage which may result from bear encounters.

get **BEAR SMART** For Tree Planters



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