

# Safety Alert of THE MONTH

MAY 2011

PLEASE PASS THIS ON TO PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS IN BC'S FOREST INDUSTRY

## Bears: Our Unpredictable Co-Workers in the Bush

A bear sighting is one of the benefits of working in the bush. Knowing how to respond to an encounter will help to keep you safe when traveling on foot through the forest. In two recently posted safety alerts forestry workers in British Columbia encountered their furry co-workers (and we aren't talking about those with play-off beards!) and used their knowledge and the company safe work practices to avoid an incident.

In the first encounter a layout crew was charged by a black bear being chased by hunting dogs. It approached to within 5-10m before noticing them and changing direction. In the second, a two person crew was receiving a road layout, working approximately 1 km apart. Fresh Grizzly bear tracks were identified and found to be circling back along the recce line toward the second worker. While no bear was sighted, the crew members rejoined and left the area to avoid an encounter.

Grizzly and black bears will respond very differently to a given situation. Grizzly bears are territorial and prone to predatory behavior while black bears are generally less likely to unprovoked attacks. As with any wildlife, it is difficult to know how it may react to meeting you. Your best protection against an incident is to **learn** about the types of bears in the area you are working in, **stay aware** of any signs of bear activity, and **be prepared** for an encounter.

### A brief briefing on bears

In the spring, bears emerge from hibernation and their first priority is to eat- replacing up to 30% of lost body weight. At this time, bears feed primarily on roots, shrubs, berries and carrion (animal carcass), later in the summer months they will feed mostly on berries, while in the fall salmon provide nourishment for the winter months. Although bears will not always follow a specified pattern, it is useful for field workers to be aware of the different feeding cycles and locations to reduce the risk of startling a bear.

Just like humans, bears display distinctive body language that helps to communicate their potential actions. Stalking, direct approaches/bluff charges, a stiffened stance, swiping the ground and making popping or huffing noises are some of the displays of assertiveness or aggression. Other postures or behaviors such as sniffing the air, indirect approaches and relaxed, interested movements may be curiosity or the bear assessing your threat to him/her.



Both black bears and Grizzlies will be more aggressive if injured, feeding on a carcass, threatened or with cubs. Understanding as much as you can about a bear in an encounter will help you respond appropriately. Forest workers should familiarize themselves with bear behavior and always assume a bear poses a threat. Human contact socializes bears and may lead to dangerous habits; give them plenty of room and return to the area once they have left.

### Identifying Bear Activity

Recently upturned earth or root masses, evidence of digging, claw marks or hair on trees, fresh tracks or scat may be signs of bears in the area. Staying aware of these signs will reduce an unexpected encounter.



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## Be Prepared for an Encounter

In both reported encounters, the crews were trained, experienced and prepared to work in bear country. They were aware of safe work practices and carried appropriate personal protection.

The best way to survive an encounter is to avoid – make plenty of noise while working. Crack sticks and shuffle your feet through the undergrowth, talk or sing loudly particularly while working in bushy areas with short sight lines. Look around more frequently when working in overgrown areas, alongside creeks or in high wind that may make it difficult for bears to hear you.



A remote crew (whether working alone or with a partner) should always have fully charged radios and know what channels to use to contact both their partner and outside assistance. Bear or wildlife sightings or signs of activity in the area should be communicated on an on-going basis and where possible, crews should have prior knowledge of bear sightings.

Consider carrying bear deterrents such as bear spray or bangers. Know how to use the brand you own and inspect regularly for leakages, punctures, dirty nozzles and expiry dates. Never carry in the cab of the vehicle and ensure MSDS information is available in case of accidental discharge.



If you do work with dogs be aware they may provoke an attack, carry a leash and try to avoid a bear-dog interaction. During hunting season dogs may be used to track bears which can cause sudden encounters with stressed animals, watch for hunting vehicles on the roadways and listen for dogs barking.

Do not dispose of food waste in the bush. This can attract bears to the area and create a danger to other workers who may be working in the area following your departure.

### Keep yourself safe in the woods with greater awareness & preparedness.

This Safety Alert is a starting point for your education and preparation in dealing with bear encounters while working in the bush. You may wish to reference the BC Forest Safety Council's [Bear Safety package](#) or the On-the Job section of [Bear Smart](#) for more details.

### Considerations for the company

- All workers who face wildlife hazards in their work should have a bear/wildlife safety orientation.
- Make contact with Conservation Officers, other workers in the area or locals who may be able to give you current knowledge on recent bear sightings or encounters.
- Consider making bear spray and bangers required equipment when working in bear country. Ensure your crews have been trained in the proper care, storage and use. Be aware that bangers can create fire hazards under certain conditions.
- Firearms can create additional hazards. Workers who carry rifles must be licensed to do so.
- Create practice scenarios during an orientation or safety meeting to enhance bear safety knowledge and improve decision making skills for how to respond to different situations. Have workers discuss their experiences.



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- Involve field workers in the development of Safe Work procedures relating to bear encounters. Make sure workers know who to call in the event of an attack, when to leave an area and the company policy on carrying firearms.

