

Hiking & Camping in Black Bear Country

Recreational use of parks and wilderness areas is increasing. Tolerance and an appreciation for the unpredictable nature of resident wildlife is increasingly important. Negative encounters are often a result of human carelessness rather than an aggressive act by the animal. This is especially true with bears. Most bear “attacks” are caused by surprising a bear and usually can be prevented. Understanding bear behavior and recognizing bear sign are important when hiking or camping in Bear Country.

Black Bear Facts

- Keen sense of smell (7 times more powerful than dogs); can detect odors over a mile away.
- Goes without food for 6 to 7 months during hibernation in their northern range.
- Very curious, resourceful, and intelligent.
- Excellent memory and remembers food sources for life.
- Nervous, shy, easily frightened – can cause serious injury if startled, cornered, or provoked.
- Usually prefers to avoid humans.
- Opportunistic; will take advantage of readily available food.
- Becomes bolder when hungry or habituated.
- Very powerful and strong, thus should be treated with caution and respect.
- Proficient at climbing, swimming, and running up to 35 MPH.
- Often avoids open areas and prefers protective cover of trees and thickets.
- Diet consists of approximately 85% vegetable matter including nuts, berries, seeds, and grasses.
- Stands up on hind legs NOT to attack but out of curiosity and to get a better look or smell.

Before the Trip

- Plan ahead – be prepared. Contact the local wildlife agency or park headquarters for information about the area wildlife, hiking/camping procedures and precautions as well as for any current bear aware tips.
- Familiarize yourself with bear behavior and signs.
- If camping, learn various ways of hanging food out of bears’ reach, including counter-balances.
- Be sure tent, sleeping bags, and your skin are free of any lingering food odors
- Avoid packing odorous food and nonfood (fragrant cosmetic, toiletries, etc.) items. Use bear-proof containers, doubled plastic bags or airtight canisters to seal in odors.
- Bring extra bags for leftovers and for packing out garbage, if necessary.
- Pack a flashlight and binoculars.
- Avoid taking a dog or keep it leashed.

On the Hike

- Travel in groups. Do not allow children to stray or run ahead.
- Remain on trail and never hike at night.
- Always stay alert. “Advertise” your presence by wearing bells, singing, clapping, etc. Do not allow your “advertising” to distract you from staying aware of your surroundings.
- Discard garbage in bear-proof trash containers or pack out in sealed plastic bags. Leave no trace.
- Don’t surprise a bear! Use caution when traveling in windy weather, down-wind, approaching blind curves, dense vegetation, and noisy streams, where a bear may not see, smell or hear you coming. Stop, look, and listen. Make noise before approaching these areas.
- Circling birds and/or offensive odors may indicate an animal carcass – avoid this area or use extreme caution.
- Never leave any food or backpack unattended.

Bears are naturally afraid of humans, but may become “habituated” or accustomed to people along popular hiking trails. Keep the area safe for humans and bears by never feeding or approaching bears. Should a bear come near you he is most likely curious or smells something interesting. If he stands up, he is not going to attack but is trying to get a better look or smell. Bear attacks are extremely rare and by comparison a person is about 67 times more likely to be killed by a dog, or 90,000 times more likely to be killed in a homicide. Bears are powerful and strong animals; they should always be treated with caution and respect.

Bear Encounter Guidelines

- If a bear approaches you, stay calm.
- **ABSOLUTELY DO NOT RUN** (running may elicit a chase response in the bear).
- Pick up small children so they don’t run, scream or panic.
- Gather the group together and restrain your dog.
- Let the bear know you are human; talk in a soothing voice; lift arms overhead to look bigger.
- Slowly back away and avoid direct eye contact with the bear.
- If the bear lunges, snaps his jaws, slaps ground or brush with paw, he feels threatened -you are too close. Back up slowly without turning your back on the bear.
- The bear may also suddenly rush forward and stop as a “bluffing” tactic to intimidate you to leave; momentarily hold your ground, then keep backing away and talking softly.
- Don’t crowd the bear; leave him a clear escape route.
- Retreat from the area or make a very wide detour around the bear.

- If he continues to follow you, stand your ground and yell, clap your hands, wave your arms, or throw something toward him – repeat until he leaves.
- As a last resort – drop something like a hat to distract him but avoid tossing him food or your backpack as he will quickly learn to confront other humans for food rewards.

Camping

- Choose an open site away from dense vegetation, natural food areas, forest cover, or natural pathways Avoid messy sites and areas with bear sign: torn apart logs, tracks, trampled brush, scat, claw marks on trees.
- Secure all scented items by hanging at least 10 feet off ground and 5 feet from tree.
- Restrict all cooking, eating, cleaning activities and food storage to 100 feet downwind from tents.
- Do not sleep outside of tent or with any “smellables” in your tent including empty food wrappers.
- Never leave any food scraps or garbage out.
- Wash dishes and utensils immediately – dispose of waste water downwind, 100 feet from sleeping area.
- Always use flashlight and extra caution when moving around at night.
- Store all food and odorous attractants (including garbage and cooking clothes) in sealed bags or in airtight canister.

Source: <https://www.americanbear.org/education-awareness/hiking-camping/>