

Bear_Country_1992.txt

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Bear Country
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There's an old saying: "when a pine needle drops in the forest, a turkey sees it, a deer hears it, and a bear smells it." Canada is bear country. Wherever we live, we go camping and hiking in what is probably bear territory.

While the chances of meeting bears are relatively low, largely because of bears' disinterest in most people, we must know how to avoid, recognize, and deal with bear encounters. CJ'93 participants will camp right in the heart of bear country, but all of us have need of this information. It comes from an Environment Canada Park Service brochure, titled YOU are in Bear Country.

Bears are strong and agile wild animals that will defend themselves, their young, and their territory if they feel threatened. All bears are potentially dangerous; they are unpredictable and able to inflict serious injury. NEVER feed or approach a bear.

Tips for Safe Camping

Put away food and garbage, strong attractions to bears. Keep your campsite clean and never leave around food, garbage, coolers, cooking equipment or utensils. Lock food in the trunk of your vehicle or hang it at least 4 m off the ground between two trees. Several campgrounds have bear poles or steel food caches.

Do not cook or eat in or near your tent or tent trailer. The lingering odours of food invite bears. Clean utensils and put garbage in containers immediately after eating. Do not get food odours on your clothing or sleeping bag. Sleep in different clothing than what you wear for cooking. Use a flashlight at night. Many animals feed at night, and a flashlight may warn them away.

Tips for Safe Hiking

Bears feel threatened if surprised. Hike in a group and make loud noises. Whistle, talk, sing, or carry a noise maker (e.g. bells). Most bears will leave if they are aware of your presence. Stay in the open as much as possible. Keep children close at hand on trails.

Be especially alert when travelling into the wind. A bear may not get your scent and be warned of your presence. In dense bush and near rushing water, the animal likely won't hear your noise-maker.

Stay away from dead animals and berry patches, important food sources for bears. You'll often see crows and ravens circling over dead animals. Report dead animals to park wardens.

Watch for bear signs, tracks, fresh diggings, and droppings.

NEVER approach a bear, especially a bear cub. A protective mother is usually nearby and may attack if she thinks her cub is in danger.

Leave your dog at home. A dog often infuriates a bear and may come running back to you with the bear in pursuit!

Backcountry Camping Safely

Camp in designated campgrounds. In random camping areas, pick a spot away from animal and walking trails and the sounds of rushing water. Camp near large sparsely-branched trees you can climb if necessary. If you spot fresh bear sign, choose another area.

Avoid fresh perishable foods with strong odours (e.g. meat and fish) that attract bears. Freeze dried foods are best. Keep tent pads clean and free of food and garbage.

Cache food away from your tent. Use bear-resistant food storage facilities where provided or suspend food between two trees (at least 4 m up and 1 m away from trunk) if possible. Store food and garbage in airtight containers.

Pack out all garbage. Don't bury it; bears can easily locate it and dig it up. Burning scraps of food is not recommended; if you do it, make sure you burn them to ash.

Avoid smelly cosmetics, perfumes, hair sprays, and soaps.

Menstruating women should be extra careful. Bears may be

attracted to them.

Bear Confrontations

Make a wide detour or leave the area if you see a bear at a distance. If you cannot detour or retreat, wait until the bear moves from your path. Always leave the animal an escape route.

Do not run. Most bears can run as fast as a racehorse. A scream or sudden movement can trigger an attack.

Don't throw anything at a bear; it may provoke an attack.

Watch the bear for aggressive behaviour--snapping its jaws together, making a "whoofing" sound, or keeping its head down with ears laid back. Consider any bear that moves toward you aggressive. If the bear does not seem to be displaying aggressive behaviour, talk softly in monotones and slowly back up. If a bear rears on its hind legs and waves its nose in the air, it is trying to identify you. Keep still and speak in low tones.

Keep calm. Assess the situation. There is no guaranteed life-saving method to cope with an aggressive bear, but calm behaviour has proven the most successful. Sometimes bears will bluff their way out of a threatening situation by charging and veering away at the last second. Back away quietly; never run!

If a climbable tree is nearby and the bear shows aggressive behaviour, speak softly and back slowly toward the tree. At the same time, slowly remove your pack and set it down to distract the bear.

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Climb a tree as high as you can. Adult grizzlies don't usually climb trees, but large ones can easily reach well over 4 m. Stay in the tree until you are sure the bear has left the area, then make your way quickly back to the trailhead. Black bears are agile climbers, so a tree may not offer an escape from them.

Bears are an important part of the park ecosystem and worthy of continued protection. With your cooperation, bears and people can co-exist.

Further Reference

Bear Attacks, Their Causes and Avoidance, by Stephen Herrero, Winchester Press.

Safety in Grizzly and Black Bear Country; NWT Renewable Resources.