

# How you can **stay safe** in bear country



BC Parks



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River Corridor Provincial Park.

## STAYING SAFE

Bears are magnificent, fascinating animals. Although people and bears have been interacting for thousands of years, the relationship has often been based more on fear than understanding. Studying how bears interact with each other can teach us a lot about how they avoid or resolve conflicts—lessons relevant to how we should respond to bears during encounters.

This booklet presents a clear approach to understanding bears and offers practical—and possibly life-saving—advice on how you can stay safe in bear country.

## CAUTION

While there is no guarantee that advice in this booklet will prevent you from being harmed by a bear, it can help you reduce your risks.

If you understand and apply these safety principles, you can make your next trip into bear country safer for both you and the bears.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The information in this booklet was provided in large part by the Safety in Bear Country Society and is based on their video, *Staying Safe in Bear Country*. The video was developed in collaboration with the International Association for Bear Research and Management, with the input of many world-renowned bear experts who have spent thousands of hours studying bear behaviour as well as bear-human interactions and conflicts.

Our thanks to the members of the Safety in Bear Country Society:

**Andy McMullen**—*Chair and Executive Producer; Wildlife Safety Consultant, Yellowknife, NWT.* Andy specializes in practical solutions for preventing bear and human conflicts, and has over 30 years experience. He worked with the NWT and Nunavut governments as a Wildlife Officer for 13 years and also spent 11 years working directly with mining and tourist industries.

**Stephen Herrero**—*Professor Emeritus, Environmental Science, University of Calgary, Alberta.* Steve has extensive experience in teaching, research, and professional practice in wildlife ecology and management. He has 37 years experience working with bears and is the author of the book "Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance."

**John Hechtel**—*Wildlife Biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Palmer, Alaska.* John has 32 years experience in wildlife research and management and 27 years working with bears. John was co-investigator on Prudhoe Bay oil fields bear and human conflict research as well as numerous other bear research and management projects.

**Grant MacHutchon**—*Wildlife Biology Consultant, Nelson, B.C.* Grant specializes in bear research and management issues, including habitat ecology, population biology, and bear and human conflict management. He has 27 years experience in wildlife research and management, including 22 years working with bears.

**Phil Timpany**—*Wildman Productions, Whitehorse, Yukon.* Phil has studied bears and their behaviour for 30 years. He did field production segments for B.C. Ministry of Forests *Bear Aware* safety video (1993) prior to producing, directing, and major filming of the "Safety in Bear Country" video series. Phil has demonstrated the effectiveness of video as an educational tool in bear safety training courses.

# ABOUT BEARS IN GENERAL

- Bears are intelligent and curious animals.
- Their vision is comparable to that of humans.
- Bears' sense of smell is legendary. They often stand up to catch a scent or get a better look.
- They can move much faster than any human ... over any terrain... uphill or down. They're also very strong swimmers.
- Black bears are much better at climbing trees than grizzly bears, but many grizzlies are good climbers as well.
- Mother bears, especially grizzlies, are famously protective of their offspring.

- Bears have better hearing than humans.
- The quest for food shapes every aspect of a bear's life. They spend much



*Bear den*

of their time searching for food to support growth, sustain their offspring, and prepare for winter denning.

- Bear behaviour is more predictable than most people think.



*Look for hairs*

## KNOW YOUR BEARS

### Black bears

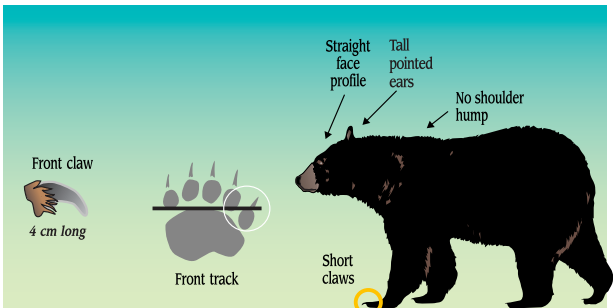
Black bears are usually black, although in BC they can also be brown, steel bluish, and even white. White phase bears are sometimes referred to as spirit or Kermode bears. Black bears lack a shoulder hump, and have shorter front claws than grizzlies.

Adult males weigh about 85 - 120 kg and adult females weigh only 50 - 80 kg on average. The black bear's diet can be up to 90% vegetation. Unlike grizzlies, black bears seldom eat plant roots. Berry crops are critical. Before berries ripen, or in years when the crop fails, black bears will forage

widely for food including human-made sources.

Black bears evolved in forested habitats and are agile climbers. Consequently, when a black bear is threatened, it usually seeks the safety of the forest rather than stand its ground and fight.

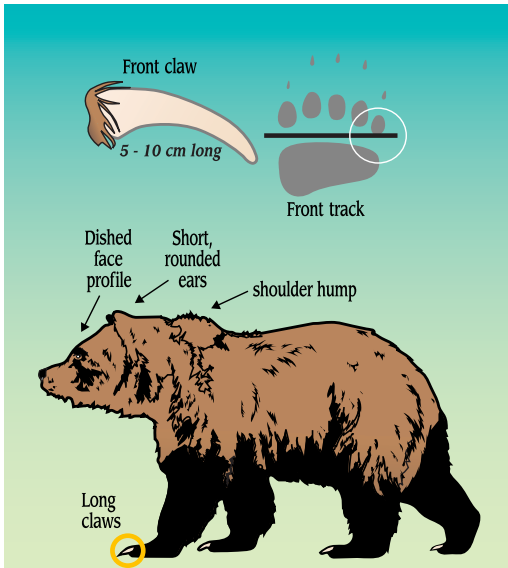
Black bear attacks are rare. Most often injury is inflicted by a black bear attracted by people's food or garbage. The most serious black bear attacks are usually predatory in nature with an average of two attacks per year in North America leading to the death of a person.



## Grizzly bears

A grizzly's fur can vary in color, from blonde to red to dark brown—or even black. Silver-tipped hairs can give them a "grizzled" appearance. They usually have a prominent hump over the shoulder, and their front claws are long and specialized for digging. Adult males weigh about 190 - 220 kg and adult females can weigh 100 - 135 kg.

Grizzly bears evolved in open habitats and without the ability to use escape cover to hide from danger. As a result, when they feel threatened, they are inclined to defend themselves. Today's grizzlies live in open and forested habitats. In some places they can be more abundant than black bears.





## BEARS IN BC

- BC has two bear species *Black* | *Grizzly*
- BC is home to about 150,000 black bears, and 15,000 grizzlies. While black bears are found throughout BC, including both Vancouver Island and Haida Gwaii, grizzly bears are primarily found on the mainland but do occur on some coastal islands.



- The names *grizzly bear*, *brown bear* and *Kodiak bear* refer to the same species.
- Colour isn't always a positive indication of species.

## CO-EXISTING WITH BEARS



A Conservation Officer sets a bear trap.



Bear release

Both black bears and grizzlies may become quite tolerant of humans and can adapt to areas occupied by people. However, not many people are willing to adapt to the presence of bears. Yet people must adjust their behaviour and actions if bears are to continue to survive. When there are conflicts with humans, it's usually the bear that pays the price.



## Safety when roadside bear viewing

The bears you see along roadways are usually digging up roots or eating grasses and other plants that make up a large portion of a bear's diet.

Traffic safety comes first. If there is traffic behind you, keep your eyes on the road and don't stop. Recognize that your passengers will get a quick look at the bear but you may not. If there is no other traffic near you, slow down and pull over where it is safe to do so.

Don't stop in the middle of the road, or close to a hill or curve. Other drivers may not see you in time to avoid a collision.



Niels Jacobson

*Stay in your vehicle, even when taking a photo.*

### At all times...

- *Stay in your vehicle!*
- *Remain a respectful distance from the bear.*

### If the bear retreats or seems to ignore you...

- *Take pictures, watch for a few moments, and then move on.*
- *Keep your vehicle on the shoulder of the road.*
- *Never feed a bear. In fact, it is illegal to feed bears in BC.*

### If the bear approaches your vehicle...

- *Put your window up and drive away immediately. This bear may have been previously fed by people and could be dangerous.*

## Safety when walking or hiking

- Stay alert. Keep an eye out for bears so you can give them plenty of room. Look for recent bear sign such as tracks, scats, fresh diggings, bear beds or tree scratches. (If you see any of these, be especially cautious.)
- Choose routes with good visibility where possible.
- Travel in groups.
- Pay attention to wind direction. If you are travelling into the wind, a bear may not be able to smell you, so make lots of noise.

## Children in Bear Country

*Closely supervise children and teach them about safety in bear country. For all ages, travelling in groups of three or more is safer.*

- Make noise to let bears know you're coming, especially in thick brush, berry patches or near running water.
- Loud talking or singing is better than using bells.
- Don't approach a bear for a closer look or better photo. Use binoculars or a telephoto lens.



*When viewing wildlife, keep your distance. Use binoculars, scopes or telephoto lenses.*



P. Jirmpany

*Be especially alert near running water which can mask the noise of an approaching bear.*

## Safety when fishing

- Stay alert. Keep an eye out for bears so you can give them plenty of room. Look for recent bear sign such as tracks, scats, bear beds, fresh diggings or partly eaten fish. (If you see any of these, be especially cautious.)
- Fish with a friend. Bears are less likely to be aggressive toward groups of people.
- Make noise, especially when your visibility is limited. If a bear hears you coming it will probably leave the area.
- Gut your catch at the shoreline, not at camp. Put the guts in the water. Pop the air bladder so the guts will sink.
- Try not to get fish odours on your clothes. Wash your hands, knife and cutting board after cleaning the fish.
- Keep your fish cooler in your vehicle. If tenting, store fish and food away from your tent in bear-resistant and odour-proof containers.



YG (K. Egli)

*Black bear tracks*

## Safety when camping

- Choose a campsite well away from wildlife trails, spawning streams, signs of recent bear activity, and bear foods such as berry patches.
- Store and cook food well away from your campsite, downwind if possible.
- In the backcountry, garbage should be stored in bear resistant and odour-proof containers and packed out. If you have a fire only burn safely-combustible waste and pack out all unburned items, e.g. tins.
- Keep a clean camp.
- In a campground, use the bear-proof garbage cans provided.
- Where bear-proof storage containers are not available, hang food and attractants 4m off the ground between trees.
- Don't bring greasy, smelly foods like bacon and canned fish.



*Bear proof containers*



*Berry patches may be inviting places to camp, but they also invite foraging bears.*

## ATTRACTANTS

Not everything a bear smells is food, but all things that smell may attract a foraging bear.



P. Timpany

*Strong smells don't have to come from garbage.  
Inedible items can also be attractants.*

These are some common items that may attract a bear to your campsite, or even you:

- Garbage
- Improperly stored foods
- Improperly burned garbage
- Barbecues
- Pet foods
- Oils
- Propane and other petroleum-based products

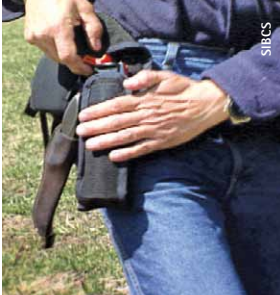
If a bear succeeds in getting an *easy meal* from improperly stored food or garbage, it is almost certain to return or seek the same food elsewhere.

## BEAR SPRAY

Used properly, bear spray can help you deter a bear, but it is not 100% effective. Make sure you are familiar with its use and don't let it give you a false sense of security.

Bear spray should only be used at close range, on an aggressive or attacking bear. Carry it ready to use, not in your pack. Even in your tent, keep bear spray close at hand.

Before using it, ensure the nozzle is pointed away from you. Exercise caution. If



*Bear spray should be easily accessible— not in your pack.*

discharged upwind or in a confined space, bear spray can affect or, in extreme cases, disable the user.

**Note:** Bear spray should not be applied to property as a preventative measure, as it may act as an attractant.



*You may have to discharge your spray more than once to repel a determined bear.*

## MYTHS

### Fed bears are tame.

*False.* Fed bears can be more dangerous than wild bears because fed bears have an expectation of receiving food from humans.

### Black bears aren't dangerous.

*False.* Black bears can be as much a danger to people and property as other bears.

### Bears can't run downhill.

*False.* Bears are agile and can run downhill easily and quickly.

### Bears are slow.

*False.* Bears can run at high speeds over short distances.

### Bears don't swim.

*False.* Bears are excellent long distance swimmers.

### All bear attacks are predatory.

*False.* Bear attacks can be predatory or defensive. Most serious attacks by black bears are predatory while most attacks by grizzly bears are defensive.

## FIREARMS

If you intend to carry a firearm, make sure it is adequate—30 caliber or larger or a 12-gauge shotgun with rifled slugs.

Practice until you can shoot quickly and

accurately under stress and at close range.

If you use a firearm to stop a *bear attack*, aim to kill. Wounding a bear can make the situation much worse.

Firearms should only be used as a last resort in a life-threatening situation.

## Transportation

*Bear spray and firearms have regulations governing their transport and use. Consult with local authorities about what is allowed in your area.*



*A bear that feels crowded will display aggressive behaviour.*

## HOW DO BEARS RELATE TO OTHER BEARS?

Bears spend much of their time alone but they are also social animals and have a social structure. Large individuals are dominant over smaller or newly independent juvenile bears. Dominant bears have best access to preferred feeding sites and mates.

While each bear has a home range, these ranges overlap. Yet each bear maintains and defends its own immediate, personal space. Depending on seasonal food abundance, bears may or may not tolerate being close to each other.

A bear's body language communicates a great deal about its mood or temperament, as well as conveying important signs of dominance or submission.

Most encounters between bears involve caution and avoidance, with the bears slowly separating. But if one ignores the other's warnings or crowds its personal space, the situation can suddenly turn nasty.



*A juvenile black bear, low in the social structure*



## HOW DO BEARS RELATE TO HUMANS?

Bears may relate to humans in similar ways as they relate to other bears. But most bears also have had previous experience around people and have learned—good or bad—from each interaction.

- A bear that is low in the social structure with other bears may try to prove its dominance in an encounter with humans. Luckily, the most common interaction is a bear avoiding a human who is not even aware of the bear's presence.
- A bear that has been fed—intentionally or through poorly handled attractants—may be more determined to get food in another encounter.



P. Timpany

*Nobody likes to be surprised. If it happens, respect the bear's need for space.*

## SIGNS OF STRESS

Whether relating to another bear or to a human, bears use the same behaviours to indicate their stress.



P. Timpany

*A salivating bear is stressed.*

Some are *subtle*, such as

- a pause in activity,
- yawning,
- a stiffening stance, or
- a change in body orientation.

Others are *more obvious*, such as

- huffing,
- moaning, and
- teeth popping.

### *High stress or aggression*

is expressed by

- salivating,
- roaring and open-mouth jawing,
- paw swatting,
- guttural sounds, or
- a charge—which usually stops short of contact.



P. Timpany

*This "yawning" mother bear is indicating her stress.*

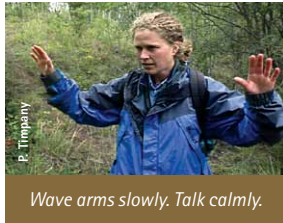
## WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU ENCOUNTER A BEAR?

Your best strategy is to avoid unwanted encounters with bears... just as most bears avoid you. But in the wild, this isn't always possible. So what should you do if you see a bear? Stop. Remain calm. Assess the situation.

***Does the bear know you're there?*** If not, move away quietly, watching for any change in its behaviour. Be careful not to startle it. Shouting at a grizzly that is unaware of you could provoke an attack. Make a wide detour and try to leave undetected. If you see young bears on the ground or in a tree, or you hear bear vocalizations, be extremely cautious and go back the way you came, as quietly as possible.

***If the bear becomes aware of your presence,*** stay calm, and in a non-threatening way, let it know you're a human. Talk to it in a low

respectful voice. Wave your arms slowly. Even if it seems unconcerned, ***never approach a bear***: if you crowd it, you might provoke an aggressive response. Instead, back away slowly, avoiding sudden movements



keeping an eye on the bear.. And ***don't run***: that could trigger a chase.

A bear's usual response to detecting a person is to move away. Let it leave. If you must proceed, do so cautiously, making noise as you go.

## WHAT DO YOU DO IF A BEAR APPROACHES YOU?

If a bear starts to approach, you're in a more serious situation. Stop and remain calm. Get ready to use any deterrent you may be carrying. ***Don't run away***—unless there is a safe place so close, you're absolutely certain you can reach it before the bear can get to you.

Remember: climbing a tree is no guarantee of safety. If you're with others, group together. Keep your pack on—it may protect your back and neck.

This is when you need to assess the bear's behaviour and determine ***why*** it is approaching.



*Bluff charges can stop inches short of you or veer off beside you.*

### DEFENSIVE

It may be reacting defensively, ***perceiving you as a threat***—to itself, its cubs, or its food. Whatever the cause, a defensive bear will likely appear agitated or stressed.

The closer you are when a bear becomes aware of you, the more likely it will react in a defensive manner—and the less time you'll have to react.

Though most defensive interactions with bears stop short of contact, they do sometimes result in attacks.

With ***grizzlies***, defensive attacks almost always stem from surprising a bear at close range—when it's on a carcass—or protecting its young. On the rare occasion when a ***black*** bear attacks defensively, it usually involves a mother defending her young.

## NON-DEFENSIVE

A bear may approach and take an interest in you for non-defensive reasons as well. It could just be *curious* ... It might be after your *food* ... or testing its *dominance* ... In the rarest case, it might be *predatory*—seeing you as potential prey. All of these non-defensive approaches can appear similar—and shouldn't be confused with defensive behaviours.

A *curious* bear will have a slow, hesitant approach with ears cocked forward, and head and nose raised to investigate what you are... *Food-conditioned bears* may be bold and come right into your camp or home looking for food.

Sometimes a bear may approach you deliberately to test its *dominance*.

In contrast to these a *predatory* bear will be intensely focused on you—as a potential meal. With its head up and ears erect, its approach is confident and persistent. Predatory bears—especially ones that have been food-conditioned—have been known to break into structures and attack people. Despite all the media attention, predatory attacks are extremely rare.



SIBCS

*This hesitant bear is merely curious...*



P. Timpany

*...while this bear is intent, predatory.*

## NOW WHAT DO YOU DO?

If you think a bear is reacting **DEFENSIVELY**, your goal is to avoid being seen as a threat. Talk to the bear, and let it know you mean no harm. A defensive bear is stressed by your presence. When it no longer feels threatened, it may simply retreat.

A defensive bear might also approach you—or even charge. If it does, stand your ground! Facing a defensive bear can be terrifying, but it's your best strategy: most defensive charges stop short. Don't shout or throw anything. Once it knows there's nothing to fear, the bear should calm down and stop its approach. When it's no longer advancing, start slowly moving away—still reassuring it in a calm voice.

If the defensive bear advances again, stop and stand your ground once more! If the bear seems intent on attack, use your deterrent.



*An encounter is considered an attack only if the bear contacts you.*

Finally, if a **DEFENSIVE** bear *attacks*, wait as long as you can before it strikes you, then fall straight to the ground, face down, with your legs spread slightly. Lock your fingers behind your neck. Protect your face and vital organs. If the bear flips you over, roll back onto your stomach. Don't cry out or fight back. Once a defensive bear no longer thinks you're a threat, it will stop attacking. Lie still and wait for the bear to leave. Moving too soon may provoke another assault.



*Protect your face and vital organs*



*A defensive bear attacks to remove a threat.  
In a defensive attack... play dead.*

Whatever its motivation, when a **NON-DEFENSIVE** bear moves toward you, it will show little stress—and your response needs to be assertive: Stay calm and talk to the bear in a firm voice. Try to move out of its way—it may simply want to continue on its path.

If the bear follows and stays focused on you, you're in a dangerous situation: it's time to become aggressive. Shout! Stare the bear in the eye. Make yourself appear as large and threatening as possible. Let it know you'll fight if attacked. Stamp your feet and take a step or two towards the bear. Stand on a rock or log. Threaten the bear with anything you can. And use your deterrent.

If a **NON-DEFENSIVE** bear *attacks*, fight back with all your might. Use any weapon within reach. At this point, you're dealing with a predatory bear intent on eating you. Be as aggressive as possible, concentrating on the bear's face, eyes and nose. Don't give up! You may be fighting for your life...



Stand on a log to make yourself appear larger.

***A predatory bear is intent on eating you.  
In a predatory attack... fight back.***



## REMEMBER

If you come across a bear that isn't aware of your presence:

- Try to move away without getting its attention.

When you encounter a bear that already knows you're there:

- Identify yourself as human by talking and waving your arms.
- Move away without running.

If the bear starts to approach:

- Stand your ground.
- Stay calm.
- Prepare to use your deterrent, and
- Determine what kind of approach the bear is making.

### If it is a DEFENSIVE APPROACH:

*(bear will appear stressed or agitated and may vocalize)*

Try to appear non-threatening.

Talk in a calm voice.

When the bear stops advancing, start slowly moving away.

If it keeps coming closer, stand your ground, keep talking, and use your deterrent.

If the bear attacks, fall on the ground and play dead.

When the attack stops, lie still and wait for the bear to leave.

or

### If a bear APPROACHES you NON-DEFENSIVELY:

*(bear will be intent on you with head and ears up)*

Talk in a firm voice.

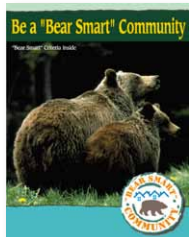
Move out of the bear's path.

If it follows you, stop and stand your ground. Shout and act aggressively. Try to intimidate the bear and use your deterrent.

If it attacks, fight for your life!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

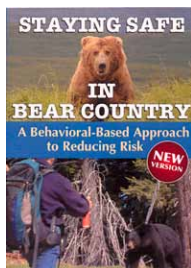
### BC bear awareness resources



### Available on DVD

- Staying Safe in Bear Country
- Living in Bear Country
- Working in Bear Country

These productions can be purchased at some book and souvenir stores or ordered from Distribution Access at: 1-800-665-4121  
[www.distributionaccess.com](http://www.distributionaccess.com)



### Websites



[bcparks.ca](http://bcparks.ca)



[bearaware.bc.ca](http://bearaware.bc.ca)



[bearsmart.com](http://bearsmart.com)



[env.gov.bc.ca/wld/bearsmart/](http://env.gov.bc.ca/wld/bearsmart/)

# R.A.P.P.

## Report All Poachers and Polluters

Conservation Officer 24 Hour Hotline

1-877-952-RAPP (7277)

Cellular Dial - #7277



BRITISH  
COLUMBIA

[www.rapp.bc.ca](http://www.rapp.bc.ca)

Conservation  
Officer Service



Help the Conservation Officer Service stop, solve and prevent environmental crimes.

## Available 24/7

Leave a secure tip to report violations of fisheries, wildlife or environmental protection laws; or wildlife-human conflicts where public safety is at risk.

For violations related to tidal recreational fisheries and in-river salmon fisheries, contact Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) at 1-800-465-4336.

### HOW CAN I HELP?

- **Never confront a suspect.**
- **Record: suspect/vehicle information, type of violation, location, date and time.**
- **Report as soon as possible.**

The BC Wildlife Federation pays rewards up to \$2000 for information leading to the charge of persons who have: violated laws related to the protection of fish, wildlife, or the environment; or damaged the property of companies or individuals who provide access to hunters and anglers.



