

Bear Fact: Black Bear Not As Harmful As It Looks Or Acts

How Dangerous Are Black Bears?

Black bears can injure or kill people, but they rarely do. When pressed, they usually retreat, even with cubs. Attacking to defend cubs is more a grizzly bear trait. (Grizzlies live only in Alaska, northern and western Canada, and the Rocky Mountains south to Yellowstone.) Black bear mothers often leave their cubs and flee from people, and those that remain are more likely to bluff — charge than attack. Still, it is prudent to use extra caution with family groups that allow close approaches because mothers are generally more nervous than other bears. Nevertheless, chances of being attacked around campsites by any black bear are small. During a 19-year study of bear/camper encounters in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, only two injuries were reported in 19 million visitor-days. The study included the year 1985 when bear nuisance activity was at a record high. The two injuries were by one bear on September 14 and 15, 1987. The bear was killed the next day.

Unprovoked, predatory attacks by black bears are rare but highly publicized. Such attacks have accounted for all 23 deaths by noncaptive black bears across North America this century. Most occurred in remote areas where the bears had little or no previous contact with people, rather than in and around established campsites. The worst attack occurred in Ontario in 1978 when a black bear killed and partially consumed three teenagers who were fishing. Predatory attacks by black bears are usually done without bluster or warning. People involved in such attacks can improve their chances by fighting rather than playing dead. Deaths from such attacks average a little more than one every four years across the United States and Canada. By comparison, a person is about 180 times more likely to be killed by a bee than a black bear

and 160,000 times more likely to die in a traffic accident. Each year there are many thousands of encounters between black bears and people, often unknown to the people because the bears slip away so quietly. Menstrual odors have been shown to be attractive to bears, but there is no record of a black bear attacking a menstruating woman.

Dozens of minor injuries, some requiring stitches, have occurred across North America when people petted or crowded black bears they were feeding or photographing. Under those circumstances, black bears may react to people as they do to bears with bad manners, by nipping or cuffing with little or no warning. Also, people who tease bears with food have been accidentally injured when the bear quickly tried to take it. Fortunately, black bears usually use at least as much restraint with people as they do with each other.

Black bears that want our food sometimes use threats or bluffs to get it, as has been reported by campers, picnickers, and backpackers. The most common behavior of this sort is blowing, which may be accompanied by clacking teeth, lunging, laid back ears, slapping the ground or trees, and/or a short rush. The same behavior is used to scare other bears from feeding areas. The sounds and actions are all done explosively, with effective results. However, it is rare for a black bear to attack a person during or after such a demonstration. All blowing bears observed by the author retreated when pursued. A less common sound is the resonant "voice" of a bear. This is used to express intense emotions (fear, pain, and pleasure), including strong threats. Black bears with ready escape routes seldom use this threat toward people. Grunts are used in nonthreatening communication to cubs, familiar bears, and sometimes people.

—U.S. Forest Service