

How to Camp in Black Bear Country

text and photos by Lynn Rogers



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This brochure was originally published in 1988 by the U. S. Forest Service under the title "How To Live With Black Bears" by Lynn Rogers. The author updated the text on September 28, 2001, and changed the title to reflect the fact that the brochure is mostly about camping. The photos are copyrighted by Lynn Rogers and cannot be used in any other form without permission.



INTRODUCTION

Seeing a black bear can be one of the most memorable experiences of a wilderness vacation. Bears seem almost human at times, partly because of their high intelligence and partly because they can stand and sit like we do. Their diet is also somewhat like ours, so fruit and nut shortages are problems for them just as they were for primitive people. In years of crop failure, black bears are almost as quick as chipmunks to overcome their fear of people and seek out food. And they are extremely adept at

getting it. They have color vision, acute hearing, and a keen sense of smell. They learn quickly and can remember feeding locations for years. They can climb trees, bend open car doors, and pry out windshields. They readily swim to island campsites. They adapt their lifestyles to the availability of food, often becoming nocturnal to avoid confrontations with us rather than sleeping at night like they usually do.



Black bears can swim to island campsites.

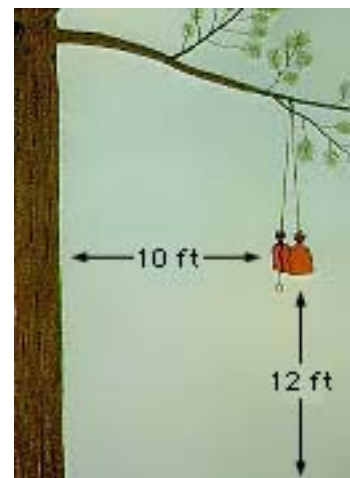
HOW TO PROTECT YOUR FOOD AND PROPERTY

The best way to prevent food pilfering in bear country is to avoid the bears. That means by-passing campsites with bear tracks, fecal droppings, and scattered garbage. Bears are regular visitors there. But if you must camp at such sites, keep a clean camp. The less food odor in your camp the less chance the bears will linger when they make their rounds. Wash dishes immediately and dump the water away from the camp. Completely burn any edible garbage, including grease, rather than burying it or throwing it in a latrine.

Most black bears will not enter a tent with people in it, but it is still a good idea to keep food and food odors out of tents and sleeping bags. To be on the safe side, wash food from your face and hands before going to bed and hang clothing beyond reach of bears if it has food or cooking grease on it. Perfume may mask human odor, preventing bears from knowing a person is in the tent.

Bearproof food lockers and portable bearproof containers provide the best protection for your food and are far superior to any alternative. An outfitter who outfits hundreds of groups each year switched from canvas food packs to portable bearproof containers three years ago and says he has not lost any food to bears since. Bearproof food containers are lightweight and their price is competitive with canvas packs.

The next best thing to a bearproof food container is to store food in the trunk of your automobile or in sealed plastic bags suspended from a line between two trees. Some campsites have lines or horizontal poles 20 feet above the ground. Sling the food bags over the line or pole so they hang 5 feet below it, at least 10 feet from the nearest tree trunk,



and at least 12 feet above the ground. Bears have been known to leap from tree trunks to snatch food bags, and large black bears can reach up nearly 9 feet without jumping. Slinging the bag over a branch is less effective because bears can break small branches and climb out on large ones. If a branch must be used, sling the bag far out on the tip of a branch larger than 4 inches in base diameter. Bears sometimes chew through ropes to get hanging food bags, so it is best to counterbalance the bag with a second one to avoid tying the rope where a bear can bite it. To retrieve counterbalanced bags, use a long stick to push one bag up so the other will descend to within reach.

Most campers do not see a bear, especially in years when natural food is abundant. But when natural crops fail, bears recognize some human foods as worth trying. Where bears are campwise, hanging food might be only a delaying tactic to give you time to personally protect it. Pans hung on the food bag can alert you. Nonburnable garbage should also be hung and should be packed out when you leave.

Bears learn that coolers, backpacks, food bags, and other containers might contain food. Keeping empty containers out of sight (in a car trunk or away from camp) or leaving them open so bears can see that they are empty will reduce property damage. If the containers smell of food, hang them with the plastic food bags to prevent bears from carrying them off. Food odors in empty containers are minimized if the food was packed in plastic bags that can be taken out of the containers and hung. When leaving camp, tie tent flaps open so bears can easily check inside.

WHAT TO DO IF A BLACK BEAR VISITS



Black bear mothers may bluff-charge, but they rarely attack people.

A black bear in camp requires caution but is not cause for great alarm. Most are timid enough to be scared away by yelling, waving, and banging pans. But a few are too accustomed to people to be bothered. Many people have lost their food and vacation by being timid. Campers experienced with black bears simply chase them away before the bears settle in to eating a week's supply of vacation food. They make sure the bear has a clear escape route and then yell, wave, and rush to no nearer than 15 feet of the bear.

This is especially effective when several people do it together. If alone, a person might create the illusion of numbers by throwing sticks through the underbrush. Don't feed the bears or try to pet them. Touching a wild bear can elicit a nip or cuff.

A recent study by the National Park Service showed that bears sometimes are harder to chase after they have begun eating. Some bears in that study gave low intensity threats when people slowly approached closer than 15 feet, but all bears that were chased retreated. No visitors were attacked. People are often more timid at night, but bears retreat at night as well as by day. Capsaicin spray repellent usually persuades black bears to leave when it is sprayed into their eyes. Capsaicin, the active ingredient of cayenne peppers, has long been used by mailmen as a dog repellent. In more than 200 trials, no bear gave any sign of anger after being sprayed,

sometimes repeatedly. Most immediately turned and ran, stopping eventually to rub their eyes. The repellent irritates the eyes for several minutes but causes no injury.



Black bears usually run away when people chase them or spray pepper spray in their eyes.

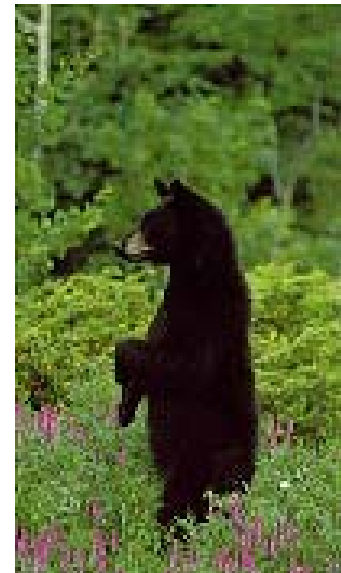
HOW DANGEROUS ARE BLACK BEARS?

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. It is prudent to use caution when close to any bear, but chances of being attacked around campsites by any black bear are small.



Both black bears and grizzlies can be brown, but no grizzlies live east of the Rocky Mountains

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, and the bear was killed the next day.



A sign of curiosity, not anger, standing helps bears see and smell.

Unprovoked, predatory attacks by black bears are highly publicized but rare. Such attacks have accounted for all 48 deaths by non-captive black bears across North America this century. Most occurred in Canada and Alaska where the bears had little previous contact with people, rather than in and around established campsites. Predatory attacks by black bears are usually without bluster or warning. People involved in such attacks can improve their chances by fighting and using pepper spray. Deaths from such attacks average a little less than one every two years across the United States and Canada.

By comparison, a person is about a hundred times more likely to be killed by a bee than by a black bear and a hundred thousand 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. A misconception is that menstrual odors are attractive to black bears. Actually, there is no record of any menstruating woman ever having been attacked by a black bear, and studies have shown no attraction by black bears to such odors.

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. Unlike domestic dogs, which often are territorial and aggressive toward strangers, wild black bears are basically timid.

Black bears that want our food sometimes bluff in ways that appear threatening, as has been reported by campers, picnickers, and backpackers. Hungry bears that approach people for food often lack the confidence to approach calmly, and they express their nervousness and fear by lunging and slapping the ground or a tree, blowing and clacking their teeth, and exhibiting other blustery behavior. Black bear lives are ruled in large part by food and fear, and they have several ways of expressing different levels of fear. Blustery sounds and actions are done explosively and appear ferocious, but I have never seen or heard of a blustery bear coming after anyone and hurting them. All blustery bears that I have seen ran away when pursued.

Black bears have a resonant, human-like "voice" that they use to express a range of emotions such as fear, pain, pleasure, and anger. In over three decades of close-up research, I have never heard a black bear growl, although most bear stories I have heard include mention of a growl. A common sound that campers hear is the low, throaty moan of fear that bears commonly voice when they are treated.

Encounters with bears are remembered and retold for years to come. Most campers in black bear country never see a bear. Seeing one is proof that we still have extensive enough forests for this wide-ranging animal. Keeping a clean camp helps to insulate bears from the effects of our increasing use of the wilderness for recreation and helps prevent bears from being needlessly relocated or killed as nuisances.



Most injuries from black bears are minor and result from feeding, crowding, or petting. The bear pictured here is tame. It would be extremely rare for a wild bear to dare to come this close.



Text and photos by Lynn L. Rogers
Information and reviews for the original brochure "How to Live with Bears" (1988) were obtained from Federal, State, and Provincial biologists, university researchers, and managers of national parks and forests throughout the United States and Canada. The text was updated by the author on September 28, 2001.