

# BEARS AND PEOPLE

A Guide

TO SAFETY AND CONSERVATION ON THE TRAIL



READ this brochure carefully. Your behaviour affects the survival of wildlife and your own safety.

## Why bears do what they do.

Bear attacks are uncommon. Wild animals generally prefer to avoid people and bears are no exception. **Most** encounters between bears and people occur when the bear's natural avoidance behaviour shifts to aggression because of the following factors:

1. You surprise them.
2. They are protecting young or food.
3. They follow food and food-like odours to you.
4. Your dog provokes an attack.
5. The bear you encounter is habituated to people and has lost its natural fear.

The following guidelines to safety in bear habitat are just that—guidelines. Bear behaviour is hard to predict because they are complex animals. Each bear is an individual with the potential to react differently in different situations. The information that follows will give you some basics on how to avoid an encounter in the first place and guidance on how to react should one occur.

 Parks Canada recommends carrying bear spray with you at all times on the trail.

### Bear Spray

Research indicates that bear spray can be effective with some bears when used properly. If you plan to carry it, be aware that wind, spray distance, rain, freezing temperatures and product shelf life can all influence its effectiveness. Familiarize yourself with the proper use of bear spray (including the manufacturer's specific instructions) and keep it readily accessible. *However, the best way to live safely with bears is to avoid contact with them.*

## 1. AVOIDING an encounter

### Make noise!

Watch for fresh bear sign.

Keep your dog on a leash *at all times*.

Travel in groups.

**Never approach a bear. (Always maintain a distance of at least 100 metres).**

- **Make noise!** Let bears know you're there. Call out, clap hands, sing or talk loudly—especially near streams, dense vegetation and berry patches, on windy days, and in areas of low visibility. (Some research shows that bear bells are not enough).
- **Watch for fresh bear sign.** Tracks, droppings, diggings, torn-up logs, turned-over rocks are all signs that a bear has been in the area. Leave the area if the signs are fresh.
- **Keep your dog on a leash at all times** or leave it at home. Dogs can provoke defensive behaviour in bears.
- **Travel as part of a group** if possible and *never* let children wander.
- Use officially marked paths and trails and travel during daylight hours.
- If you come across large dead animals, leave the area immediately and report it to Park Wardens.
- Dispose of fish offal in fast moving streams or the deep part of a lake, *never* along stream sides or lake shores.

## 2. HANDLING an encounter

### Stay calm.

Get your bear spray ready.

Speak to the bear.

Back away slowly, **NEVER** run.

- **Stay calm** and don't alarm the bear with screams or sudden movements. Your calm behaviour can reassure it. Bears may bluff their way out of an encounter by charging and then turning away at the last second. Bears may also react defensively by "woofing", growling, snapping their jaws, and laying their ears back. It's difficult but important to remain calm if a bear reacts to you this way. A scream or sudden movement may trigger an attack.
- **Speak to the bear.** Let the bear hear your voice—talk calmly and firmly. This lets the bear know you are human and not a prey animal. If a bear rears on its hind legs and waves its nose about, it is trying to identify you.
- **Back away slowly, never run!** Running may trigger a pursuit and bears can run as fast as a racehorse, both uphill and downhill.
- **Make yourself less vulnerable**—pick up small children and stay in a group.
- **Don't drop your pack.** It can provide protection.
- Always leave the bear an escape route.

 Visitor Centre staff can provide information on current bear activity, closures, warnings and safety advice.

## 3. Handling an ATTACK.

Most encounters with bears end without injury. If a bear **actually makes contact**, you may increase your chances of survival by following these guidelines. In general, there are **2** kinds of attack:

### DEFENSIVE

*What is the bear's behaviour?*

The bear is feeding, protecting its young and/or unaware of your presence. It attacks because it sees you as a threat.

Use bear spray.

If the bear makes contact with you: **PLAY DEAD!**

**PLAY DEAD.** Lie on your stomach with legs apart and position your arms so that your hands are crossed behind your neck. This position makes you less vulnerable to being flipped over and protects your face, the back of your head and neck. Remain still until you are sure the bear has left the area.

 These defensive attacks are generally less than two minutes in duration. If the attack continues, it may mean the attack has shifted from defensive to predatory—fight back!



Bottom line?

It is very difficult to predict the best strategy to use in the event of a bear attack. That is why it is **so** important to put thought and energy into avoiding an encounter in the first place.

### PREDATORY

*What is the bear's behaviour?*

The bear is stalking (hunting) you along a trail and then attacks. Or, the bear attacks you at night.

Try to escape into a building, car or up a tree.

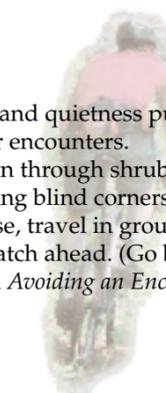
If you can't escape, **DON'T PLAY DEAD.** Use bear spray and fight back!

**FIGHT BACK!** Intimidate that bear: shout; hit it with a branch or rock, do *whatever* it takes to let the bear know you are **not** easy prey. This kind of attack is very rare but it is serious because it usually means the bear is looking for food and preying on you.

### Cyclists!

Your speed and quietness put you at risk for sudden bear encounters.

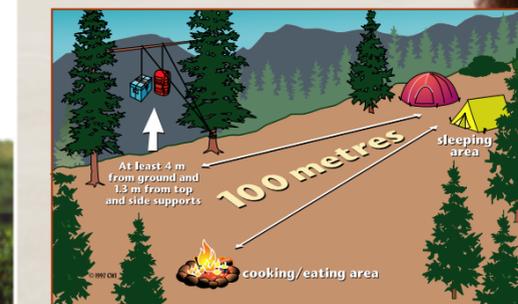
- Slow down through shrubby areas and approaching blind corners;
- Make noise, travel in groups, be alert and always watch ahead. (Go back to the section on *Avoiding an Encounter* for other advice).



## Backcountry Camping

To stay safe and protect wilderness, travel with two goals in mind: limiting your impact by avoiding encounters and managing your food, food smells and garbage.

- **Camp in designated areas** where provided. Avoid camping near running water, thick brush, animal trails or berry patches.
- **Keep yourself and campsite odour free**—set up cooking, eating and food storage areas at least 100 metres from your tent and consider wind direction. Keep sleeping bags, tents and sleeping clothes free of food, food odours or beverages.
- **Leave smelly cosmetics at home**—Store toiletries and personal items with food.
- **Use bear-resistant canisters** that provide for food and garbage storage. They are mandatory in some northern national parks for overnight backcountry trips.
- **Store your food, pet food, livestock feed and garbage away from your tent.** Hang between two trees at least 4 metres above the ground and 1.3 metres from top and side supports.
- **Wash and store all dishes and food utensils immediately after use.** Strain food particles from dish water and store with garbage. Dump dish-water in designated areas or at least 100 metres from your sleeping area.
- **Pack out garbage**—do not burn or bury it. Same storage as food.



Bears are extremely sensitive to the stress of human activity. You can actually help protect these animals by avoiding encounters with them.

# What does a BEAR see in this LANDSCAPE?

## REFUGE

*a secure home.*

## 50% ROCK & ICE

*and the precious green space that's left.*

## RUGGED LANDSCAPE

*to weave and climb through.*

## SEASONAL FOODS

*in scattered patches.*

## POTENTIAL DEN SITES

*for the upcoming winter.*

## OTHER BEARS

*cubs to protect, a mate a mountain range away, rivals.*

## What it takes to survive 365 days a year

*Bears are as individual as the members of your family...and so are their survival strategies. All bears in the mountains face similar challenges each season but each animal survives in its own particular way. What does it take to survive each year?*

### SPRING

**Bears emerge lean from hibernation, onto a lean landscape.**

There's snow at high elevations so bears congregate in valley bottoms to find early green-up. Grizzly bears head to sunny, exposed avalanche slopes to dig for roots and bulbs. If they're lucky, bears may find carcasses of winter-killed animals—a critical energy boost, especially for a female nursing cubs.



Dandelion



Field horsetail



Spring beauty and glacier lily

**Males seek out available mates...often travelling great distances.**

The grizzly male's urge to reproduce is strong but females don't hit breeding age until around 5 years old and it may be another 5-6 years before they're ready to breed again. To secure food and available mates, a male's home range may be as large as greater Vancouver. Black bears also have low reproductive rates when habitat quality is poor.



Yellow hedsarum



Golden-mantled ground squirrel

**As snow retreats, plants flourish and bears range widely to find these green pockets.**

Avalanche slopes remain critical to grizzly bears offering a rich variety of plant food and forest edge that provides cover. Black bears, a forest species, remain largely in the valley bottoms where they find food, and security from grizzly bears.



Cow parsnip



Ants and other insects

### SUMMER

**Bears are devoted mothers.**

Here in the Rockies, grizzly bear cubs may remain with their mothers for up to 5 years—learning the ropes for survival in the mountains. Female grizzlies aggressively defend their cubs from dominant male bears and other threats. Black bear cubs are ushered up trees for protection from adult black bear males and grizzly bears.



Sow grizzly and young cubs

### FALL

**Bears are driven to consume up to 35,000 calories per day.**

Bears dig, push, rub and peel their way through an area looking for food. This behaviour leaves behind interesting clues—large diggings (ground squirrels and roots) turned



Buffaloberry

over rocks and logs (insects), berry bushes that have been stripped clean (up to 250,000 berries/day in peak season). The focus is feeding—along forest openings, trails, road edges and in campgrounds—sometimes around the clock.

### WINTER

**Bears give birth in mid-winter—if they're fat enough.**

Both black and grizzly adult females have a physical adaptation called "delayed implantation"—the fertilized egg doesn't implant in the uterus unless the female has enough fat reserves to grow and nurse cubs. Born into a secure den environment, the tiny, blind cubs (usually two) suckle on their sleeping mother's rich milk.



Black bear den

## Survival of the species

Bears can live to be 25 years old in the wild. Unfortunately many die human-caused deaths well before this, cutting short their legacy of future offspring. To maintain a population, births must balance deaths. Grizzly bears have the lowest reproductive rate of any mammal in North America.

## The landscape obstacle course

Black and grizzly bears have evolved physical adaptations over millions of years and an intelligence that gives them a fighting chance to make a living here. But times are changing. Rapidly. The growing population of humans, increasing development, resource extraction activities and recreational access are all carving up and eating away wilderness.

Bears need the habitat in the Rocky Mountain national parks more than ever but it's become a kind of obstacle course. Think of what it would be like to travel around the mountain national parks in midsummer, trying to avoid people around towns; campgrounds; highways; railways; busy trail networks... and still find enough food to survive.

It's becoming harder for bears to avoid bumping into people even in our parks. These protected areas are an important part of the remaining habitat for black and grizzly bears in North America.



Sharing the valley with wildlife. The town of Jasper in Jasper National Park.

*We breathe in mountain air like a tonic but bears read it like an invisible map. Their keen sense of smell helps them negotiate the landscape, guiding them to food and away from possible threats.*



## What happens to a bear when it encounters people?

*The first time, the second time, the third time...*

A bear has two options and a coping strategy.

1. **It can alter its path of travel** or abandon an area, displacing it from an important habitat.
2. **It can react aggressively:** this usually only happens when the bear is surprised at close range and feels threatened. Serious human-bear encounters may result in the bear's destruction and loss from the ecosystem.
3. **It becomes habituated:** with frequent, repeated exposure to people, a bear loses its natural wary behaviour and becomes increasingly bolder. It's more likely to enter a campground or townsite where food or garbage may be improperly stored. Research indicates habituated grizzly bears are three times more likely to die a human-caused death.

## NOT JUST ONE THING

### The cumulative effects of humans on bears

growing human population  
resource extraction  
timber harvesting  
road access  
recreation  
resort and housing development  
removal/killing of habituated bears  
road and rail mortality  
poaching  
hunting

## The 3 second decision

Your personal decisions count. It only takes three seconds to consider the impact you may be having on bears and to make a different decision that can help protect bears.

The best thing you can do for bears is to limit their exposure to you. When you spot a roadside bear, consider not stopping (one less person contributing to its habituation). When you're in campgrounds, bear-proof your site and keep it completely attractant-free: take the extra 3 seconds to move the hibachi into the trunk, the dog food bowls into the car or the suntan lotion into the locker.

Before you hit the trail think about the time of year, what the bears are probably doing and how you can give them the room they need to do it. Use official trails only and leave the wild trails to wildlife. Respect temporary and seasonal closures—they're in place to give bears a chance to use critical habitat or habitat linkages undisturbed.

## Learn more about bears and wild spaces!

- Read *Keep the Wild in Wildlife*, a park guide to sharing habitat. It spells out the steps you can take in more detail: camping, hiking, biking and driving.
- Visit Park Canada's website for more information and some valuable links. <http://parksCanada.pch.gc.ca/>
- Talk to Visitor centre staff and Mountain Park Heritage Interpretation Association (MPHIA) certified guides.
- Friends' retail outlets carry a variety of books on bears and other wildlife.

**CONSERVATION** isn't just about bears; it's about protecting the whole ecosystem. Wild spaces and wilderness values can survive as long as we strive to be stewards—not consumers—of wildness.



Bottom line? To survive, bears need space with few human surprises.