



## **Safety in Bear Country Society**

Script of the program

# **Staying Safe in Bear Country: Revised Edition 2008**

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### **Introduction**

Bears are among nature's most fascinating creatures. Although people and bears have been interacting for thousands of years, the relationship has often been based more on fear than understanding.

How bears and humans get along has a lot to do with how we respond to each other during encounters. Knowing a little about their behavior can enable us to have safe and enjoyable interactions in the wild. This program presents a new approach to understanding bears, and offers practical – and possibly life-saving – advice on how *you* can stay safe in Bear Country.

### **Staying Safe in Bear Country**

Bears are powerful carnivores, well-equipped to do each other serious harm. Yet they have also evolved ways to minimize the chance of injuring each other. Most encounters between bears are characterized by tolerance and restraint. It's the same when they meet up with people: they usually try to avoid a confrontation. Countless interactions between people and bears occur without any harm. A meeting ... a mutual departure... no attack .... no injury ... no news. Despite their formidable strength and their potential for aggression, violent encounters between bears and humans are surprisingly rare. In North America, on average three people die from bear attacks each year, although injuries occur more frequently. On some occasions, it may be necessary to destroy a bear to defend a person's life or property. Regrettably, hundreds of other bears are also shot and killed every year - needlessly. In some parts of North America, bear populations are increasing. And as more people live, work, and travel in Bear Country, the number of interactions between bears and humans is also on the rise.

To avoid troublesome encounters with bears, the best strategy is to avoid confronting them in the first place. Yet most people don't know how to steer clear of bears, or what to do when they meet one. Do *you*?

Biologist John Hechtel has over 30 years of hands-on experience with both black and grizzly bears. John uses his expertise to educate people about bear safety and bear conservation.

**John Hechtel:** *"The best way to minimize conflicts with bears is by practicing prevention."*

*Though bears are forgiving of almost all human behavior by following some simple rules you can reduce your chances of encountering a bear, and just as important, of attracting one. But despite the best precautions, you still may occasionally meet a bear. Bears often display many of the same types of behaviors toward humans that they use with each other, therefore, the safest way to reduce risk during an encounter is to have knowledge and understanding of their behavior and motivation. You should be able to anticipate the most common situations where you might encounter bears and it's a good idea to mentally practice how you should respond. This knowledge and preparation can empower you to act appropriately around bears and avoid an attack. You have control over most of the important factors that determine your safety. Safety is no accident. It's your responsibility."*

Bears are usually characterized as either fierce and frightening, or cute and cuddly. The truth lies somewhere in between. Learning the basics about their nature can help minimize the likelihood of an unfortunate encounter.

### **Bear Characteristics**

Bears have excellent senses. Their sense of smell is legendary. They often stand up to catch a scent or get a better look. If you can see a bear, chances are it's already detected you. Despite their keen senses, it's still possible for a bear to be surprised by your approach. And catching a bear off guard is never a good idea. Neither is running from a bear. 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 - like this adult female – are good climbers as well. You also don't ever want to disturb a mother with her young. Mother bears, especially grizzlies, are famously protective of their offspring.

The quest for food shapes every aspect of a bear's life. They spend much of their time searching for food to support growth, sustain their offspring, and prepare for winter denning.

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*. The more frequently bears come in contact with humans, the more likely they will be exposed to improperly stored food or garbage. Once a bear associates human activity with a free meal, it can become a nuisance, or – even worse – aggressive and dangerous. In rare cases, people have been killed by food-conditioned bears. However, when there are problems with humans, it's usually the bear that pays the price.

### **Differences between Grizzly and Black Bears**

Although black bears and grizzlies share many characteristics, knowing the differences between the two species may help you to better understand their behavior – and to respond accordingly. Grizzlies evolved in treeless habitats where escape to cover wasn't an option. As a result, when they feel threatened, they are inclined to defend themselves. Black bears, on the other hand, evolved in forested habitats. Consequently, when a black bear is threatened, it usually climbs a tree ... or seeks the safety of the forest rather than stand its ground and fight.

The names “grizzly bear”, “brown bear” and “Kodiak bear” refer to the same species. For clarity,

we'll call them all "grizzlies". Grizzlies inhabit forested and open habitats in Alaska, northern and western Canada and a few scattered locations in the western U.S. In some places, they can be more abundant than black bears. Certain visual clues can help you distinguish a grizzly from a black bear, although color alone isn't a reliable way to identify either species. 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.

Black bears are the most abundant bears on the continent, widely distributed throughout the forested areas of Canada, the U.S. and parts of northern Mexico. Their fur is usually black, although they can be brown or even white. They lack a shoulder hump, and have shorter front claws than grizzlies.

### **Bear Society & Bear to Bear Interactions**

Although bears spend much of their time alone, they are also social animals. They're not usually territorial, and their home ranges overlap. Yet each bear maintains and defends its own personal space – a trait vital to remember in Bear Country.

A dominance hierarchy structures social interactions. Large males rank at the top, while juveniles reside at the bottom. Those high in the pecking order have first access to preferred feeding sites and mates. Juveniles engage in aggressive play, developing skills that will help them during interactions with other bears later in life.

Studying how bears interact can teach us a lot about how they avoid or resolve conflicts – lessons relevant to our own safety with bears. 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... like this female defending her cub. Bears show stress in many ways. 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 are expressed by salivating, roaring and open-mouth jawing, paw swatting, guttural sounds, or a charge - which usually stops short of contact.

### **Bear to Human Interactions**

Ideally, you'll never surprise a bear in the wild. However, if you spend much time in Bear Country, chances are you'll encounter a bear – one way or another. Usually when a bear detects you, it will try to avoid an encounter. That's the best-case scenario...

If instead it approaches you, it's important to determine *why*. 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 a result of 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.

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 see you as potential prey. All of these *non-defensive* approaches can appear similar – and shouldn't be confused with *defensive* behaviors.

How can you tell if a bear is curious? Look for 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. Unlike a *curious* bear, one that is *predatory* 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. However, despite all the media attention, predatory attacks are extremely rare.

Stephen Herrero is professor emeritus of environmental science at the University of Calgary. He has done research on bear ecology, behavior, and conservation for over 30 years. He is author of the classic book, “Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance”.

**Stephen Herrero:** *“Over the past 33 years, I’ve studied serious and fatal injuries inflicted by bears to people throughout North America. The data clearly show that although bear attacks are rare, grizzly bears are more dangerous than black bears. Most serious and fatal grizzly bear attacks are defensive, while such attacks by black bears are typically predacious. Your response to a bear encounter shouldn’t just depend on whether it’s a black or a grizzly bear but on the circumstances and the bears behavior.”*

### **Reacting During Bear Encounters**

So far, you’ve seen the different behaviors bears may exhibit around people. Now let’s find out the safest way to respond.

What should you do if you see a bear? Always stop ... remain calm ... and assess the situation. Does the bear know you’re there? If not, move away quietly, watching for any change in its behavior. 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, walk away slowly, avoiding sudden movements. 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.

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 behavior... If you think it's 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. However, a defensive bear might 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 bear advances again, stop and stand your ground once more! If the bear seems intent on attack, use your deterrent. 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.

Now that you have seen what to do when a bear approaches in a defensive encounter, let's look at *non-defensive* approaches. Remember, there are a number of reasons why a bear may make a *non-defensive* approach: it may be curious, or food-conditioned. It could be asserting its dominance. Or it may see you as potential prey... 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. However, 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 your self 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 it 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...

Remember, a defensive bear attacks to remove a threat while a predatory bear is intent on eating you. In a defensive attack .... play dead. In a predatory attack .... fight back.

### **Preventing Bear Problems**

The key to staying safe is prevention. When moving through bear habitat, try to travel in a group. Avoid surprising bears by making your presence known: talking, clapping, or using noisemakers. Be cautious in areas where bears may not be able to detect you and be on the alert for signs of bear activity, like tracks, droppings, or marks on trees. Don't camp in areas that bears are likely to be using. Keep children close at hand. Dogs should always be under control. An unleashed dog may bring an angry bear back to you. Be especially careful in the early morning and evenings when bears are often most active. If you detect a carcass or see

scavengers, keep away: a grizzly feeding on carrion is particularly dangerous. Be extremely careful with food and garbage. Use bear-resistant containers, and burn your trash fully. Carry out whatever can't be incinerated. A bear that finds your discarded food or garbage may become a serious threat to the next person using the area.

## **Bear Deterrents**

There are a number of tools that can help you deter a bear, including noisemakers, firearms, and bear spray. Bear spray should only be used at close range - on an aggressive or attacking bear. Carry it ready to use, not in your pack. In your tent, keep deterrents close at hand. If you use a firearm to stop a bear attack, aim to kill. Wounding a bear can make the situation much worse...

Used properly, deterrents can be helpful, but they're not 100% effective. Make sure you're familiar with their use before you need them, and don't let deterrents give you a false sense of security.

## **Review**

Let's review the basic rules for staying safe in a bear encounter. 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's a defensive approach:

- 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, and keep talking;
- If the bear seems intention attack, 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.

If a bear approaches you non-defensively:

- Talk in a firm voice; and
- 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!

## **Conclusion**

Bears are magnificent, fascinating animals. They play a complex and vital role in the natural world. By learning a little about their biology and behavior, we can stay safer in Bear Country, avoiding situations that may harm us and to bears. This knowledge can help us enjoy bears and the places they live. It may also create a deeper appreciation of how people and bears can coexist.