



Bear Encounters

Hiking and Camping and Bears—Oh, My!

The American black bear and the brown bear, commonly referred to as a grizzly, are two of the three species of bears found in North America. Black bears are found in parts of northern Mexico, 41 states, most of Canada, and Alaska. Brown bears are found in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington, as well as western Canada and Alaska. Generally, if a bear knows of your presence, it will attempt to avoid you. Most bear conflicts occur because humans attempt to feed a bear or have, intentionally or not, approached a bear.

Never feed a bear! Feeding bears familiarizes them with human foods and attracts them to garbage. Garbage may contain plastics, aluminum foil, or other debris which, if ingested, may cause malnourishment, illness, or even death. Feeding bears also causes them to become “habituated” to humans, i.e., to lose their fear of humans. Habituated bears tend to become “problem” bears, as they approach humans too closely or cause damage in their quest for food. Problem bears will oftentimes need to be “removed”—a euphemism for being destroyed.

When hiking, hunting, camping, or fishing, there are several ways to avoid bear encounters. Make your presence known by talking, clapping, or singing. Carry food/garbage in odor-proof containers. Watch for signs of bear activity: tracks, scat, torn-up logs or stumps, and overturned rocks. Stay on established trails. Keep children within sight at all times and leave your pets at home. Travel only in daylight and, if possible, in groups. If you see a bear in the distance, try to alter your route to avoid it.

When camping, it is important that you properly handle and store food and garbage. Cook, eat, and clean up at least 100 yards from your sleeping area. Store food, garbage, and odorous personal items (toothpaste, deodorant, soap, and lotions) in bear-resistant containers (not ice chests), in a hard-sided vehicle, or at least 10 feet from the ground and 4 feet from side supports. Remove clothing after cooking and store it with your food. Wash your hands after cooking, eating, or handling fish/game. Strain food particles from your dishwasher and place with garbage. Do not take food, drinks, or odorous personal items into your sleeping area.

Despite your best efforts, encounters may occur. Try to gauge the bear’s intentions—is he agitated and drooling or calm and curious? Agitated, drooling bears may charge. Be aware that bears stand on their hind legs more

out of curiosity than to show aggression. If the bear appears calm, speak in a low, monotone voice and slowly back away. Never turn your back to a bear. Do not run—doing so could trigger an attack and bears can easily outrun humans. Avoid direct eye contact. If you are with a group, stay in a group. Pick up any small children.

If avoidance tactics don't work and the bear continues to approach, do not run. Try to scare the bear by shouting, making noise, waving your arms, and throwing stones. Stand your ground if charged, as bears may bluff charge several times and then leave. Don't drop your backpack, as it may offer some protection in the event of an attack. There is an aerosol bear pepper spray (not the same as personal defense sprays) that has been effective against charging bears without causing them any long-term adverse effects.

If a bear attacks you, it is important to know how to distinguish between black and brown bears, as your response to an attack will depend upon the species. Fight back with anything available against a black bear attack. Use sticks, stones, and your fists. In contrast, playing dead is your best defense against a grizzly attack: curl into a ball or lie face down, use your hands and arms to protect your neck and face, roll with the strikes, and don't move or make noise until the bear is out of the area.

So, how can you distinguish between a black bear and a brown bear? Coloring is not a reliable indicator of species, as their colorings can be similar. Black bears vary from blonde/light brown, to brown, cinnamon, rust, or black. The coloring of brown bears varies from blonde/light brown to black, with brown or reddish hairs interspersed, giving them their "grizzled" appearance. Although brown bears are, on average, larger than black bears, a large male black bear may be larger than a young female brown bear. Therefore, size is not a reliable indicator either.

There are, however, distinctions in appearance between black and brown bears. Brown bears have a concave, dished face profile, a distinct shoulder hump, and light-colored, relatively straight claws that are 2-4 inches long. Black bears have a straight or convex profile, their rumps are usually higher than their shoulders, and their curved claws are 1 ½ to 2 inches long and dark in color.