

Know your...

# BEAR FACTS



The Essentials for Traveling  
in Alaska's Bear Country

# You're in Bear Country!

# Alaska's Three Bears

Alaska is bear country and one of the few places in the world where all three species of North American bears live. You may have a chance to see a bear in Alaska. But even if you don't, you will never be far from one.


Brown bears, also called grizzly bears, are found nearly everywhere in Alaska. Black bears inhabit most of Alaska's forests. Polar bears frequent the sea ice and tundra of extreme northern and western Alaska.

Bears are curious, intelligent and tend to avoid or ignore people, but can be dangerous. Many bears live in Alaska and many people enjoy the outdoors, but surprisingly few people see bears and only a few of those are ever threatened by a bear.

Respecting bears and learning proper behavior can help you avoid conflict — and help you know how to react if you do see a bear.




## Black Bear



Length: 4 - 6 feet  
Weight: Males 150 - 400 lbs;  
Females 125 - 250 lbs.  
Color: Black to brown, some with a white chest patch; a few are bluish-gray

Smaller than brown or polar bears, straight facial profile, and shorter, curved claws. Lacks a prominent shoulder hump.


## Brown Bear



Length: 7 - 9 feet  
Weight: Males 400 - 1,500 lbs;  
Females 200 - 850 lbs.  
Color: Dark brown to blonde

Usually larger than black bears, with a prominent shoulder hump, less prominent ears than black bears and longer front claws.

## Polar Bear



Length: 8 - 10 feet  
Weight: Males 600 - 1,200 lbs;  
Females 400 - 700 lbs.  
Color: All white to cream

Large and streamlined, with a long neck and large feet. On average, the largest of the three Alaska bear species.



# Avoiding Problems

It's best to understand what bears need and avoid bears whenever possible. You can do this by keeping a clean camp and home, and by following bear safety advice when recreating or working in bear country.

## Never Approach Bears — Give Them Space

- Every bear has a “personal space”— the distance within which the bear feels threatened. If you enter that space, the bear may become aggressive.
- Give female bears extra space. Female bears are especially fierce defenders of their young and may respond aggressively if they perceive a threat to their cubs.
- When photographing bears, use your zoom; getting close could put you in danger.
- Bears, like humans, use trails and roads. Don't set up camp close to a trail they might use.
- Avoid areas where you see or smell carcasses of fish or other animals, or see scavengers congregated. A bear's food may be near. If the bear is around, it may defend its cache aggressively.

Most people who see a bear in the wild consider it a highlight of their trip. The presence of these majestic creatures reminds us how privileged we are to share our country's wilderness.



Phil Mooney, ADF&G

## Don't Surprise a Bear

- Make noise, sing or talk loudly. Always let bears know you are there.
- Avoid thick brush whenever possible. When the terrain or vegetation makes it hard to see, make extra noise.
- Hike in a group; groups are easier for bears to detect.
- Walk with the wind at your back, if possible. Bears can see almost as well as people, but trust their noses more than their eyes or ears.

## Don't Feed Bears

Bears have only a few months to build up fat reserves for a long winter in dens and are always looking for something to eat. Don't let them learn that human food or garbage is an easy meal. It is foolish and illegal to feed bears, either on purpose or by not securing food or garbage away from bears.

- Keep a clean camp. Wash your dishes. Avoid smelly and greasy foods such as bacon or smoked fish. Keep food smells off your clothing.
- Cook away from your tent. Store all food away from your campsite. Hang food out of reach of bears. If no trees are available, store your food in airtight or specially designed bear-resistant containers.
- Burn food waste completely in a hot fire. Pack everything else out. Food and garbage are equally attractive to a bear so treat them with equal care.
- Remember, pets and their food may also attract bears.
- Odorous items such as toothpaste, toiletry items and even gasoline should be stored away from your campsite and out of reach of bears.

## Don't Fish for Bears

If a bear learns it can obtain fish just by approaching anglers, it will return for more.

- If a bear approaches you while you are fishing, stop fishing.
- If a bear approaches and you have a fish on your line, give the line slack so the fish doesn't splash—or if need be, cut your line.

# KNOW YOUR

# Dealing with Close Encounters

If you see a bear, avoid it and give the bear every opportunity to avoid you. If you do encounter a bear, remain calm and try to observe what the bear is doing. Chances are good you are not in danger. Most bears are interested only in protecting food, cubs or their "personal space." Once they feel there is no threat, they will move on. Remember the following:

## If You See a Bear

- If the bear appears not to have sensed you, move away without alerting it. Keep your eyes on the bear.
- If the bear does notice you, face the bear, stand your ground and talk to it calmly. Let the bear know you are human. Talk in a normal voice. Help the bear recognize you. Try to appear larger by standing close to others in your group or wave your arms slowly above your head. Try to back away slowly, but if the bear follows, stop and hold your ground. Prepare your deterrent if you have one.
- If a bear cannot tell what you are, it may come closer or stand on its hind legs to get a better look or smell. A standing bear is usually curious, not threatening.
- If you take the above actions and the bear continues to focus on you or approach, you should become more assertive: raise your voice, beat on pans, use noisemakers, throw rocks or sticks. Use your deterrent if you have one. Drive a bear off rather than let it follow you. If you are with others, group together to look big and stand your ground.

## Surprise Encounters

- If you surprise a bear at close distance, it may feel threatened and act defensively, especially if it has cubs or food. Continue to stand your ground. If the bear moves away, walk away slowly, keeping your eyes on the bear. Increase your distance.

## Never Run

- You can't outrun a bear. Bears can run much faster than a sprinter and, like dogs, they will chase fleeing animals. A charging bear might come within a few feet before running off. It's important to stand your ground.

## In the Rare Event of an Attack

If a bear makes contact, you have two choices: play dead or fight back. The best choice depends on whether the bear is acting defensively or is seeking food.

- Most brown bear attacks are a defensive response. Play dead in defensive situations: Hit the ground and lie still if a brown bear you have surprised or any female bear protecting cubs makes contact. Lie flat on your stomach, legs spread apart for stability, with your hands protecting the back of your neck. A defensive bear usually ends its attack if it feels you are not a threat. Remain motionless for as long as possible. If you move, and the bear sees or hears you, it may return and renew its attack. In a prolonged attack, fight back.
- Fight back in other situations: Rarely, lone black bears or brown bears may perceive a person as potential food. Fight any bear that has been calmly focused on you and makes contact or that breaks into a tent or building. In almost all situations, your best defense against an attacking black bear is to fight back. Concentrate on the bear's face or muzzle with anything you have on hand.

## Protection

Bear deterrents, including firearms and bear spray, can be helpful but should never be used as an alternative to common-sense approaches to bear encounters.

Products labeled as bear spray contain capsiicum (red pepper extract) and are effective at deterring bears at close range. Bear sprays are designed to propel a mist for 15-30 feet. If discharged upwind or in a vehicle, they can adversely affect the user. Take appropriate precautions. If you carry bear spray, keep it handy and know how to use it.

If you are inexperienced with a firearm, it can be difficult to successfully deploy in emergency situations. Additionally, a wounded bear can be a greater threat to human safety. A .300-Magnum rifle or a 12-gauge shotgun with rifled slugs are appropriate weapons if you have to shoot a bear. Heavy handguns such as a 44-Magnum may be inadequate in emergency situations, especially in untrained hands.



# OUR BEAR FACTS

# In Summary

- Make noise so you don't surprise a bear. Stay alert and look for signs of bears.
- Never approach or crowd bears; respect their "personal space."
- Keep food, garbage and other attractants out of reach of bears.
- Stay calm during a bear encounter, talk and wave your arms. Don't run!

In most cases, bears are not a threat, but they do deserve your respect and attention. When traveling in bear country, keep alert and enjoy the opportunity to see these magnificent animals in their natural habitat.

For additional information, visit  
[www.alaskabears.alaska.gov](http://www.alaskabears.alaska.gov)

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