

HIKING AND CAMPING IN BEAR COUNTRY

This document is not intended to scare you but to educate you with some facts about bears while in the backcountry of Targhee National Forest and Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. The following information is furnished by the national forest. The national forests and national parks in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho are Grizzly Country. If you choose to recreate or hunt in this area, you need to learn about grizzly bears and how you can avoid having a confrontation with one. If you encounter a bear even after following all the recommendations for avoiding contact, there are many things you can do to avoid escalating the situation.

BEAR BEHAVIOR

Victims of grizzly attacks are often unaware of why they were attacked. Many attacks are caused by unexpected close encounters, where the bear has been surprised and feels threatened by human presence. A female with cubs will be especially aggressive and will defend her cubs from any perceived threat. Many attacks can be averted if the bear perceives a way out of the situation.

Because bears do not have a spoken language, they rely heavily on body language and a variety of simple sounds to communicate their intent. Understanding their “language” may help you to better understand a bear’s intent and allow you to respond appropriately.

BODY LANGUAGE

A bear that stands on its hind feet is investigating an unknown situation. *This is not an aggressive posture.* It simply means that the bear is unsure of what is in front of him. By standing on its hind feet it can get a better look and smell, and thus can better identify whatever is in front of it.

A bear that swings its head from side to side, or presents a side view of its body is expressing a reluctance to charge. It is looking for a way out of the situation.

If the bear looks at you directly and has its ears back, it is warning you that you are too close and it feels threatened. The bear may make a barking, woofing or moaning sound to further indicate its distress.

If the bear “pops” his jaws, the bear is very agitated and likely to charge. Charges are often a test of your resolve and are often “mock charges” where the bear stops short of you, veers off or runs right past you. A bear may mock charge many times before leaving.

A bear that does charge and knocks you down is attempting to remove a threat. The bear will use as much force as it believes is necessary to remove that threat. This is why lying down on the ground and playing dead is often the best thing to do in an attack situation.

ENCOUNTERS IN THE FIELD

If a grizzly bear is encountered, your actions can affect the outcome. You can provide options for both you and the bear by maintaining a safe distance and by acting in a manner that does not threaten the bear. A “cool” head is necessary to avert harm to yourself or the unnecessary injury of a grizzly bear.

If you encounter a grizzly bear, you should first try to back out of the situation. Keep calm, avoid direct eye contact, back up slowly and speak in a soft monotone. Never turn your back on the bear and never kneel. Most encounters end with the bear leaving at this point.

Never run, and do not climb a tree unless you have time to climb at least 15 feet before the bear reaches you. Remember, bears can run very fast. If you do have time to climb a tree, you may want to drop a non-food item, such as a camera, to distract the bear while you climb.

If the bear charges; stand your ground. Bears often “mock charge” or run past you. The bear may charge you several times before leaving the area. As a last resort, play dead. Curl into a ball, covering your neck and head with your hands and arms. If you have a backpack, leave it on as it will help protect your back. If the bear swats you, roll with it. Stay in a tucked position and do not try to look at the bear until you are sure it is gone. Many people have survived bear attacks using this tactic.

Report all encounters, no matter how insignificant, and even if it is much later. Your report may prevent someone else from getting hurt.

ENCOUNTERS IN CAMP

Bears that come into your camp are a completely different situation. They have chosen to approach you and have most likely become habituated to human food and garbage. These bears are dangerous because they are no longer avoiding confrontations with humans. It is important that you store your food properly.

If the bear does not get a food reward, it will be more likely to leave quickly.

Stay calm, avoid direct eye contact and speak to the bear. Get to safety as quickly as possible by slowly backing out of the area. If the bear attacks you, fight back by punching, slapping or using any object available as a weapon. Try to evade the bear by climbing up a tree or onto a boulder. Use your bear spray. Playing dead will NOT work in this situation. The bear has made a conscious choice to attack you.

BEAR PEPPER SPRAYS

The best way to avoid being injured by a bear is by using good bear avoidance behavior. However, if you are charged by a bear, your reactions can sometimes defuse the situation. Bear spray is a good last line of defense that has been highly effective in the reported cases where it was used. The use of bear spray is especially appropriate if you are attacked in your tent at night. If you successfully use pepper spray to stop a bear, leave the area immediately. The spray is effective for a short time and is less effective the second time. Bear spray is effective only at distances of 10-30 feet and is adversely affected by wind, cold temperatures, and age. Carefully read the instructions, know how to use the spray, and be aware of its limitations. Be sure to check the expiration date. **If you decide to carry bear spray, the canister must be immediately available such as in a holster on your belt or in your tent at night – not in your pack.**

In choosing a pepper spray please consider the following: Purchase only products clearly labeled “for deterring attacks by bears”. Concentration should be 1.4 to 1.8% capsaicin. Minimum net weight of 225 grams or 7.9 oz. Spray delivered in a shotgun-cloud pattern. Minimum range of 25 feet. Spray should be EPA approved. **Under no circumstances should you ever spray your campsite, tent, or in any bear habitat as some oil-based sprays may possibly act as a bear attractant.**

FOOD AND BEARS

Don't let your actions cause a bear or other animal to be destroyed. A bear has an acute sense of smell. If you leave your food out and unattended, you are inviting a bear into your camp. Bears that get food and/or garbage from people will likely continue to seek this easy source of food.

Samples of odorous items which you are required to hang include all food, garbage, empty or full beverage cans, coolers, lip balm, sunscreens and lotions, toothpaste, food panniers, horse feed, some medications, clothes worn while cooking, eating utensils which have not been properly cleaned, and any article that has an odor. Keep all food and odorous items out of sleeping bags, saddle bags, tents and their stuff sacks.

RECOMMENDED CAMP SETUP IN BEAR COUNTRY

A food storage pole outside of Yellowstone National Park is often NOT provided. Remember to:

- When possible, suspend items 10 feet above ground and 4 feet out from uprights.
- In addition to food and garbage, suspend all odorous items including toothpaste, deodorant and lotions
- Keep a clean camp, pack out all garbage
- Store food in airtight containers
- Where possible, keep your sleeping area 100 yards from your cooking and food-storage area
- Strain food particles from dishwater and pack out.
- Scatter dishwater at least 100 yards from tent site
- Bring at least 35 feet of rope to hang food
- Never eat or store food in your tent
- Sleep in a tent, not under the stars

In cooperation:

Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, Wyoming Game & Fish Department, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service