

Dealing with Black Bears



information guide



OFSWA

Ontario Forestry Safe Workplace Association

Partners on the Road to Zero

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

One of the first things you should know is that bear attacks on humans are extremely rare. Black bears killed about 35 people in North America in the 20th century. By comparison, 150 people were stung to death by wasps. Nevertheless, the risk of a bear encounter is always real in the bush. Your best preparation for such an encounter is knowledge. The more you know, the better prepared you will be.

The only bear you might encounter while in the bush is a black bear. There are no grizzly bears in Ontario, and commercially valuable trees don't grow where the province's polar bears congregate.

This information guide contains a number of general facts about black bears in Ontario. More information is available from several other sources of information listed at the back of this guide. You may wish to check with the nearest Ministry of Natural Resources office for more detailed information about the bear population in the area in which you and your workers are working. Other forestry workers may be able to provide further information on bear sightings and personal encounters.

A few facts about black bears

Adult male black bears can weigh more than 280 kg (600 lbs), while females grow to the 180 kg (400 lb.) range. Even a sizeable human is going to lose a wrestling a match with most bears, so it's a good idea to avoid getting close enough to grapple. Black bears have been recorded running at speeds of up to 50 km/h, and they can run equally well downhill, uphill, across a hill or along flat ground.

Ninety percent of a bear's diet consists of plants, berries and nuts. When wild berries begin to appear in the summer, bears can gain as much as a kilogram (2.2 pounds) per day. In late summer and fall they dine on acorns, nuts and late-season berries. Knowing what bears like to eat can help you avoid them by staying out of their pantries (blueberry and raspberry patches are especially enticing).

It's estimated that as many as 100,000 black bears live in Ontario. Since the vast majority of them favour northern Ontario over the Windsor-Toronto-Ottawa corridor, it's a safe bet that bears occupy almost every place you will be working in the bush.

A bear's eyesight is poor, but its hearing is quite good and its sense of smell is superb. Bears can detect the faintest odour from long distances when they're downwind from it. You might think you can hide a chocolate bar in your sleeping bag for a late-night snack, but you won't fool a foraging bear's nose. Keeping food or anything with a food odour in your tent is an open invitation to a bear.

The personality of a black bear

Bears are smart and are able to figure out ways to get over, around, under or through almost anything people put in their way. They can also remember details such as the locations of hidden food caches. They are naturally inquisitive animals that aren't afraid to check out anything that interests them – especially food.

Aside from humans, a bear's only natural enemy is another bear. They're prepared to fight to keep others out of prime feeding grounds and den locations. Male bears will often challenge one another for dominance over breeding females.

Black bears are normally shy. They are seldom seen in the wild because they don't want to be seen, especially by human beings. But bears will forsake their natural shyness in three situations:

- when their cubs are threatened
- when they perceive danger
- when they sense the presence of something edible.

In any of these situations, bears have been known to become threatening and aggressive.

Surprise, fear and aggression

Bears don't like surprises, and they sometimes react out of fear with the only weapon they have – a show of aggression. You can drastically lower the odds of surprising a bear in your worksite by making all the noise you can before and while working.

Understanding a bear's body language will help you interpret its intentions. In a close encounter, a bear will likely make a loud huffing or blowing sound; this means the bear is nervous or afraid. If it swats or beats the ground with its front paws, it's telling you that you're too close to it, so back away and give it more space. The bear might even bluff a charge in an effort to get you to move away from it. These displays don't mean that an attack is imminent. If you wave your arms, make noise or throw something at the bear, it is almost certain to retreat.

In the extremely rare event of an encounter with a predatory bear, the animal may not give any visual warning of its intentions, pressing closer and closer to you, assessing if it's safe to attack. Never turn and run in such situations. Be aggressive, throw rocks or sticks and make whatever noise you can.

Canadian biologist Stephen Herrero has extensively studied bear behaviour. In his book, *Bear Attacks – Their Causes and Avoidance, Revised Edition*, Herrero advocates the use of compressed air boat horns to keep bears away. Such horns are cheap and readily available. "Whistles and bells may forewarn bears of your coming, but experts caution that some noise-making devices may heighten a bear's natural curiosity instead of scaring it off."

Surprises aren't fun in the bush for bears or humans. Avoid these moments of intense emotional stress by always being aware of your surroundings. Stop and listen frequently and learn to scan your work area for unusual movement and colours while you work. Using a headset music player while working can be dangerous because it screens out other sounds that should grab your attention. A Canadian athlete who was killed by a predatory black bear while on a training run was wearing a headset. She probably didn't hear her attacker until it was too late.

An ounce of prevention

Your worksite will have stringent rules about handling food and other items that attract bears. For your own safety, know and follow these rules to the letter. Don't drop candy or food wrappings in the bush and be sure to bury your own waste, toilet paper and sanitary supplies.

Never keep snacks, clothing on which you've inadvertently spilled food or drinks, or containers in which you may have carried food items anywhere near your tent. Never burn food scraps, fat drippings or other items in a campfire. If you catch fish, clean them as far away from camp as possible and bury the entrails as deeply as you can.

Close encounters

If you do meet up with a bear, experts recommend the following actions:

- Quickly check to make sure you're not blocking the bear's avenue of escape and move slowly out of the way if you are.
- Back away slowly, being careful not to trip as you do.
- Watch for any signs of cubs and make sure you never get between a female bear and her cub(s). If you inadvertently do, move out of the danger zone as quickly as possible but don't turn your back on the bear.
- If there is a vehicle or building nearby, walk to it slowly and get inside.
- If you find a bear in a tree, leave it alone and leave the area.
- If the bear doesn't immediately flee, wave your arms, yell and make as much noise as possible. Throw rocks or sticks to scare it away. Never turn and run from a black bear – this may trigger its hunting/pursuit response and it will run you down.
- If a bear does grab you, do not play dead. Yell and fight back, hitting the bear in the nose with a branch, rock or whatever is at hand. Playing dead may only invite a severe mauling.

Pepper sprays have been tested and shown to repel bears, but they aren't a sure thing. Sprays have a short range and some brands fall shorter than others. Their effectiveness is highly dependent on wind direction. Firing pepper spray into a strong headwind might get more spray on you than on the bear. People who are close enough to a bear to use pepper spray are usually in a highly excited state, which is not the best condition for making good judgments and shooting accurately. Pepper spray is effective for covering odours left from food spills, fish cleaning or other attractants.

Raise the alarm

If you see a bear, let your co-workers know immediately that it's in the area. Stop whatever you're doing, get together in a cleared area and make as much noise as you can. Ask your supervisor to make sure the bear has left the area before work resumes.

The last word is "respect"

Always remember that you are invading the bears' natural home and you pose a threat to their peace, security and safety. You pose an even bigger threat to a bear's cubs and she will fight to the death to protect them. Respect bears and their habitat and it's highly unlikely you'll have any problems.

More information

Bear Attacks – Their Causes and Avoidance, Revised Edition Stephen Herrero, Glove Pequot Press, Guilford, CT, 2002, ISBN-13: 9781585745579 (paperback)

Up North – A Guide to Ontario's Wilderness from Blackflies to the Northern Lights, Doug Bennet and Tim Tiner, McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1997, ISBN-10: 0409911011 (paperback)

Living with Black Bears in Ontario, Ministry of Natural Resources Brochure, free from any MNR office or PDF download from: http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR_E001805.pdf

Safety in Grizzly and Black Bear Country, an extensive website. <http://www.nwtwildlife.com/Publications/safetyinbearcountry/safety.htm>

North American Bear Center, The NABC focus is to improve understanding of bears and their relationship to humans through education and research. <http://www.bear.org/website/>

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