

# You are in Black Bear Country

## A quick look at Black Bears:

- Black bears live throughout most of Ontario. They primarily inhabit forested areas where they are best able to find food, refuge and den sites.
- Their entire life evolves around food. When they are not hibernating, bears spend most of their time looking for food.
- They are large, powerful animals. Adult males can weigh between 120-270 kilograms (250-600 pounds). Adult females can weigh between 45-180 kilograms (100-400 pounds)
- Female bears have their first cubs when they are between five and seven years old. Mother bears do not produce cubs every year, they stay with their cubs throughout their year of birth and until the following spring

## Hibernation:

- Black bears hibernate for about six months. In this time, they do not eat or drink
- Most black bears in northern Ontario move into their winter dens by mid-October. In central Ontario, bears usually enter their dens by early November
- In most years black bears in northern Ontario emerge from their dens between mid- April and early May. Bears in central Ontario leave their dens from mid to late April

## Food:

- Bears feed from mid-April to late fall
- From the time bears come out of hibernation until berry crops are available, bears live off their stored fat and the limited energy provided by fresh spring greens
- Black bears eat a variety of foods. They get most of their food energy by feeding on summer berry crops such as blueberries, strawberries and raspberries, as well as hazel nuts, mountain ash, acorns and beech nuts in the fall
- In late summer and early fall some bears actively feed for 20 hours a day, ingesting as much as 20,000 calories
- Black bears are selective feeders and prefer foods that are accessible, high in energy and easy to digest. They eat both plants and animals, but the bulk of their diet is plant material
- Bears need to fatten up so they can survive winter hibernation and in the case of females, produce and feed young. Bears are instinctively driven to feed. Bears typically double their body weight during the summer and fall

## Human-bear conflict:

- If natural foods are not readily available, bears will look for other food sources – primarily your garbage
- Once bears learn where to find and get a non-natural food source, they will return again and again

## **Be safe in bear country**

Black bears live in most parts of Ontario. Chances are wherever you live, visit or spend your leisure time, you will be near bears or bear habitat. For your own personal safety, and for the well being of bears, it is important that you learn about bears and their behaviour. Know how to prevent and handle potential encounters with bears. Be safe, be responsible, be Bear Wise.

Every encounter with a black bear is unique. Experts recommend the following tips and advice. There is no guarantee that what works in one instance will work in another.

### **Avoid encounters:**

- Make noise as you move through wooded areas – especially in areas where visibility is restricted or where background noise is high, such as near streams and waterfalls. Singing, whistling or talking will alert bears to your presence, giving them a chance to avoid you
- While outdoors, keep your eyes and ears open:
- Do not wear music headphones
- Watch for signs of bear activity, like tracks, claw marks on trees, flipped-over rocks or fresh bear droppings
- If you are out with a dog, leash it. Uncontrolled, untrained dogs may actually lead a bear to you
- Pay attention, especially if you are undertaking activities like working, gardening or berry picking. Occasionally scan your surroundings to check for bears. Rise slowly from your crouched position so you don't startle any nearby bears. They may not recognize you as a human when you are in a crouched position

### **Think about safety:**

- Carry and have readily accessible a whistle or an air horn
- Learn how to carry and use bear pepper spray. Know its limitations
- If you are in "back country" consider carrying a long-handled axe

### **Whenever you spot or encounter a black bear:**

- Stop. Do not panic. Remain calm
- Do not try to get closer to the bear for a better look or picture. Never feed a bear
- Do not run, climb a tree or swim
- Quickly assess the situation and try to determine which type of an encounter this might be – sighting, surprise or close encounter
- Always watch the bear. While watching the bear, slowly back away until the bear is out of sight
- If you are berry picking, or enjoying other outdoor activities like hiking, jogging cycling or camping leave the area
- Tell others about bear activity in the area

## **Encountering a Black Bear**

If you encounter a Black Bear it is likely to react in one of four ways.

1. **Fleeing Bear**
2. **Habituated Bear**
3. **Defensive Bear**
4. **Predatory Bear**

### **1. Fleeing Bear**

In most cases, a bear will hear or smell you before you are aware of it. Even if you surprise a bear, it will most often flee the area. Reacting to a fleeing bear... Enjoy the fleeting sight of a wild Black Bear.

### **2. Habituated Bear**

Some bears lose their fear of humans from frequent human contact or from being rewarded with human food or garbage. These bears may not respond to our attempts to dissuade them and may react defensively. Reacting to an Habituated Bear... Stay calm and determine if the bear is aware of you. If the bear is unaware of you, move away quietly. However, if the bear is aware of you, talk to the bear in a low tone, wave your arms, back away, and leave the area. If you are near a building or car, get inside as a precaution. If the bear was attracted to food or garbage, remove it after the bear leaves to discourage the bear from returning.

### **3. Defensive Bear**

A defensive bear will respond in a defensive manner if it perceives you as a threat or if it is defending a food source. It may use vocalizations such as huffing, blowing air loudly through nostrils, exhaling loudly and "popping" of teeth, and may swat the ground with its fore paws, lowering its head, and drawing back the ears. As well, a defensive bear may resort to bluff charges. The bear is feeling threatened by your presence and is trying to get you to back off. Reacting to a Defensive Bear... Stop and face the bear. If you are with others, stay together and act as a group. Make sure the bear has a clear escape route. Slowly back away while watching the bear and wait for it to leave. Use a whistle or air horn, or bear spray if you have them. Do not turn and run - this may trigger a predatory response in the bear. Do not climb a tree - bears are excellent climbers.

### **4. Predatory Black Bear**

On EXTREMELY RARE occasions, a bear will attack humans with the intent to kill. Predatory bears seldom make huffing or "popping" sounds, nor do they swat the ground with their forepaws, or bluff charge as defensive bears sometimes do. Instead, they silently stalk, or press closer and closer to their intended prey, apparently assessing whether it is safe to attack. Reacting to a Predatory Bear... Leave the area in your canoe or car if you can, but never turn and run. If you cannot leave, confront the bear. Do everything in your power to make the bear think twice about attacking you. Be aggressive, yell, throw rocks, hit the bear with sticks, and use your whistle, air horn, or

bear spray if you have them. If a predatory bear does make contact with you, do not play dead. Fighting back with everything you have is the best way to persuade a predatory Black Bear to halt its attack.

## **If You Encounter a Bear**

Despite taking precautions, you may still encounter a bear. Remember that bears are complex, intelligent animals and no two encounters are alike. There is no single strategy that will work in each situation, but you can minimize your risk by following these guidelines:

- Keep calm. Think ahead; your brain is your best defence against a bear attack. Plan how to respond if you encounter a bear.
- Don't run. Bears can easily outrun you. By running you may trigger an attack. Make yourself less vulnerable. Pick up small children and stay in a group.
- Give the bear space. Back away slowly and talk in a soft voice. Do not approach the bear or make direct eye contact.
- Leave the area or make a wide detour. If you cannot leave, wait until the bear moves out of the way and ensure that it has an escape route.
- The bear may approach you or rear up on its hind legs. Bears are often curious. If one stands on its hind legs, it is most likely trying to catch your scent; this is not necessarily a sign of aggression. Back away slowly and talk in a soft voice.
- Do not drop objects, clothing or food to distract the bear. If the bear receives food, it will have been rewarded for its aggressive behaviour, thereby increasing the likelihood that it will repeat that behaviour again.
- Watch for aggressive behaviours. A bear may display aggression by swinging its head from side to side; making vocalizations such as huffs, snorts, whoops, or moans; displaying teeth or claws; jaw popping; swatting at the ground; staring with eye contact; panting; or laying its ears back. These behaviours usually indicate that the bear is stressed, acting defensively and asking for more space. Attacks rarely follow. This is the most common kind of black bear aggressive encounter.

## **If an Attack Occurs**

Black bear attacks are rare! However, if one occurs, there are varying recommended responses depending on the situation. Remember that these are only guidelines and that each encounter is unique.

### **Defensive attack:**

If you surprise a bear and it responds to defend itself, its young or its food - and contact has been made or is imminent - play dead (lie on your stomach with your legs apart; protect your face, the back of your head and neck with your arms; remain silent; and if wearing a pack, leave it on for protection). Remember: such attacks are rare despite the much more common aggressive displays without contact by black bears. The bear will leave you alone once it believes the threat is passed.

## **Offensive attack:**

This is the most serious and potentially deadly attack a black bear might make! It occurs when a bear appears to stalk or follow you for a period of time and then chooses to attack; or the bear attacks you at night. In this situation, playing dead is not appropriate. Try to escape to a secure place such as a vehicle or hard-sided camper.



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Climbing a tree is an option, but remember that black bears can climb trees easily. If you cannot escape and a bear continues its pursuit, react aggressively and try to intimidate the bear. If this fails, fight back with anything at hand such as bear spray, rocks, sticks, knives or other possible weapons to let the bear know that you are not easy prey. Act as a group if you are part of one. Don't forget to yell; help may be close by. Chemical bear repellents/bear sprays contain a derivative of cayenne pepper. When sprayed directly into an animal's face, they cause eye and upper respiratory tract irritation. Although such sprays can be effective when used properly, wind and other circumstances may alter their effect on the animal. Therefore, use them with caution and always follow the manufacturer's directions. Bear sprays do not guarantee your safety.