

Bear Safety In Alaska's National Parklands

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Bears and campers often frequent the same areas in Alaska's national parks. In coastal parks, both tend to spend time on the beach, the narrow band of land found between the sea and the brush, forest, or steep cliffs. Bears prefer these areas because they often contain abundant vegetation for grazing and make travel easy, while campers prefer these areas for cooking and because they offer easy access to kayak travel. Inland parks are also home to bears and it is important that campers respect their space.

Some parks require campers to attend an orientation at the Visitor Information Station. During this orientation a park ranger will inform you about areas that are closed to camping due to high bear activity or recent bear/human encounters. If the park you are visiting does not have a bear safety orientation, take the time to read this brochure and learn how you can camp safely in bear country. Contact park staff to obtain current information on bear safety issues. Once in the backcountry you are on your own. Some parks require you to obtain a camping permit and may issue free bear-resistant food containers (BRFC).

It is likely that bears and campers will encounter one another, but by remaining calm and following the basic advice of experienced bear behaviorists, you increase the odds of a positive outcome for both you and the bear.

Cover photo © Robert Sabin

Bear Signs to Watch for and Areas to Avoid

It is important to be "bear aware" when camping and hiking in Alaska's national parks and to avoid seasonal bear foraging areas (sedge meadows, berry patches, etc.). Bear signs are easy to find if you know what to look for. Select a campsite with the least amount of bear sign and away from seasonal bear foraging areas. Here are some signs to be on the lookout for:

Bear scat or tracks that seem very recent or abundant. Be alert.

Trails are formed because of consistent use. Bears will often follow the path of least resistance, for example, lakeshores and ridgelines.

A tree or log that has bear hair or claw marks may indicate that it is a repeatedly used bear rub-tree.

Large dug up areas could be forage sites, day beds, or belly holes.

Avoid salmon streams! Bears like fish. And a noisy stream may lessen your ability to hear a bear or for a bear to hear you.

Narrow beaches with steep cliffs or extremely dense brush do not allow a bear to pass safely. Remember that at high tide a bear will not have as much room to pass between your camp and the high water line.

Neither you nor the bear want to be surprised by the other. Avoid areas with restricted visibility and make noise when exiting your tent.

Ask yourself: Can a bear walk by and pass my campsite and cooking area unhindered?



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Cooking and Storing Food

Keep all food and cosmetics in the BRFC when not in use. Place any snacks, wrappers, lip balm, sunscreen, etc. that were used while kayaking or hiking into the BRFC before entering your tent. It is not a good idea to store food in kayaks overnight. At night, store your BRFC and clean cooking gear off of main animal trails, (in coastal parks above high tide line) and at least 100 yards from your tent and hidden in thick brush or behind rocks.

Prepare and consume food at least 100 yards from your tent site and food storage area. Try to select cooking areas where you can see a comfortable distance to minimize the risk of a surprise encounter with a bear passing through the area.



National Park Service photograph

If camping in a coastal park, prepare and eat all food in the intertidal zone, that area below the seaweed debris line and the waterline. Cook and eat as close to the water as possible so cooking smells and any food particles will then be washed away by the next tide.

Be prepared to quickly stow all food back into the BRFC if a bear should suddenly approach. Keep your gear together—minimize the amount of space that you occupy. Always ask yourself, "Is there room for a bear to get around us?" Or "Can I quickly get all this gear under my control?"

Minimize Bear Disturbance and Displacement

If you see a bear and it does not see you, back away out of sight and change your course. Move out of the area or quietly observe the bear at a safe distance without approaching or otherwise disturbing it. Disturbance is evident whenever a bear changes its behavior because of you. If it stops eating and looks up, sniffs the air with ears erect, trying to locate you, you are too close! Bears only have 6-8 months to acquire the calories and fat reserves needed for the entire year. Give them space!

While many bears seem to be tolerant of human presence at distances farther than 100 yards, each animal and situation is different. Pay attention to the bear's behavior and respect its right to feed and travel undisturbed. Use telephoto lenses and binoculars. Allow bears to pass by your camp undisturbed. If you have made sure that the bear is aware of your presence so it is not surprised and have kept all your gear under your direct control, allow the bear to pass by unhindered. You may just be afforded the opportunity to safely observe this amazing creature in its natural environment.



Photo © John Hyde

Do not pursue or harass bears for the sake of a close encounter or photograph, either on land or from your watercraft.

Minimize the Risk of Having Your Gear Destroyed



Photo © Robert Sabin

When choosing your tent site avoid areas frequented by bears, camping in travel corridors (e.g., river corridors and trails), and do not camp in the intertidal zone.

Do not leave gear unattended. This includes tents, clothes, pads, water bottles, etc. Consider using a portable electric fence to discourage bears from investigating your camp.

Keep gear together and under your immediate control. In coastal areas minimize the amount of space you take up on a beach. Again, ask: "Is there room for a bear to get around our camp?" A Tip: set up tents after making dinner and take them down before breakfast in order to keep all gear with or very near you in the intertidal when cooking or packing up kayaks.

Elevate your reaction if a bear elevates its inquisitiveness. If a bear approaches make noise, wave your arms, etc. Stand your ground! Never surrender your gear to a bear!

Photo © Terry D. DeBruyn

Handling a Bear Encounter

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Basic Bear Safety Tips

As the number of visitors to bear country in Alaska increases so does the number of human/bear encounters. The vast majority of these encounters do not result in human injury or fatality. However, a much larger proportion of these encounters do result in the bear's death. You can help prevent injury to yourself, to others, and to the bear by taking a few basic precautions.

Stay Alert

Stay constantly alert in bear country. Use your ears, eyes, and even your nose to detect the presence of a bear. The sooner you are aware of the bear, the more time you and the bear will have to react appropriately.

Be Visible, Make Noise

A surprise encounter with a bear is dangerous and can be terrifying. However, you can reduce the potential for such encounters. Avoid surprises by traveling in open areas with good visibility. Make noise as you walk, particularly in thick brush, or when rounding a blind corner — talk, clap, and sing. Be extra alert in windy conditions or near noisy streams or beaches that may mask your sounds. When possible, travel with the wind at your back.

Safety in Numbers

The larger your group is, the less risk of a bear attacking. Stay together as a group, particularly if visibility is poor.

Avoid Bears

If possible change your course to avoid the bear or move out of the area slowly. Never approach a bear, even from your boat or kayak. Approaching bears is dangerous and can cause undue stress and disturbance to the bear increasing the risk of attack.

Store Food Properly

Keep all food and scented items under your immediate control at all times. While camping, keep a clean camp and store food appropriately.

Report Bear Encounters

If you have an encounter, report it to a park ranger as soon as possible. This will alert others and enable park staff to respond appropriately to the situation if necessary.



Photo © Terry D. DeBruyn

What Should You Do if You Encounter a Bear?

First assess the situation. Does the bear see you? If the bear does not see you, simply move away from the bear and the encounter is over.

Non-defensive Bear Encounters

- If the bear is aware of you and either looking or not looking at you, or moving steadily along a route, this can be considered non-defensive behavior.

What if you are hiking or kayaking and you encounter a non-defensive bear?

- Change your course to avoid the bear. Increase your distance from the bear and stay alert to the bear's whereabouts.

What if you are camping, cooking, or eating and you encounter a non-defensive bear?

- Keep all of your gear under your direct control.
- Make sure the bear is aware of your presence. Talk calmly to the bear and stand your ground!
- If you are in a group, stay together without blocking the bear's route. If the bear is not focused on you allow the bear to pass peacefully.
- If the bear approaches and is focused on you, stand together and elevate your defensive actions by shouting, yelling, and waving your arms. Do not retreat from the bear. You can also use noisemakers like air horns or bang pots and pans.
- If the bear departs the encounter ends.
- If the bear continues to approach, stand your ground and remain assertive.
- If a bear charges you stand your ground and remain assertive. Make yourself look big. Most non-defensive charges do not end in contact.
- Now is the time to use bear pepper spray if you have it!
- If the bear makes contact fight back vigorously! This is likely a predatory attack. Kick, punch, or hit the bear's face, eyes and nose.

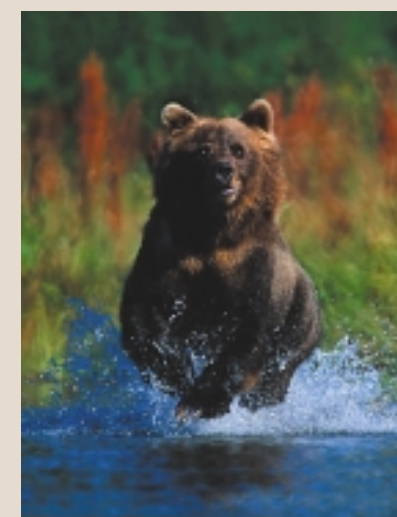


Photo © John Hyde

Defensive Bear Encounters

- Defensive behaviors arise when bears are defending food or female bears are defending their offspring. Defensive encounters usually occur suddenly and at close distances.
- Defensive behavior may include snorting, huffing, jaw popping, and charging.

- If you note any of these behaviors **STOP AND STAND YOUR GROUND**. Your safety lies in calming the bear.
- Talk calmly to the bear; move slowly away diagonally if the bear is stationary.
- Continue to monitor the bear as you move from the area.
- If the bear renews its advance stop and stand your ground again. Talk calmly to the bear.
- If the bear charges remain non-threatening and stand your ground. Most charges do not end in contact. Now is the time to use bear pepper spray if you have it!

What if the bear makes contact during a defensive encounter?

- **IF IT IS A BROWN BEAR, PLAY DEAD:** Lie face down with your hands clasped behind your neck and legs spread apart so the bear can't turn you over. Do not move until the bear leaves the area. If the attack is prolonged and the brown bear begins to feed on you, fight back vigorously! The encounter has now likely changed from a defensive one to a predatory one.
- **IF IT IS A BLACK BEAR, DO NOT PLAY DEAD:** Fight back vigorously!
- **NEVER PLAY DEAD WITH A BLACK BEAR!** Most black bear attacks are predatory.
- **FIGHT ANY BEAR THAT ATTEMPTS TO ENTER YOUR TENT!!**

Left: Standing brown bear, photo © Robert Sabin