

SCA Guideline

How to Live and Work in Bear Country

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As you know, SCA operates in some areas in the country that have high populations of bear. We have prepared this document to assist staff and members recognize the risk of living and working in bear country and take appropriate actions to mitigate those risks through identification, awareness and knowledge.

I. Identification

Similarities

Although grizzly and black bears have many distinguishing features that make identification easy and reliable, color and body size are among them. The color and size of grizzly and black bears can be too similar to use them as the sole characteristics for making an accurate identification.

Coat Color

Coat color is the least reliable characteristic for identifying bears as there is a great deal of variability in the color of both the grizzly and black bear. **Grizzly bears** may be pale—almost luminous blond or reddish blond, light brown, darker brown, or even almost black. The common name grizzly is derived from the term “grizzled,” which refers to white-tipped hair. Grizzled hair occurs mainly on the back and shoulders; thus, from a distance, a grizzly bear appears to have darker legs and lighter upper parts. This frosted appearance of some of the bears is what gives the bears the nick name “silvertip.” **Black bears** are not always black. They can also be brown, cinnamon, blond, or a combination of light and dark hair

Body Size

Body size is also not a reliable way to identify bears. Adult female **grizzlies** typically weigh 200-350 pounds and adult males weigh 300-650 pounds. An adult **black bear**, can also weigh 200-300 pounds, and may also be about the same height (3-3 1/2 feet at the shoulder and 5-6 1/2 feet when standing erect). In some cases an adult male black bear can weigh 400 lbs and be bigger than an adult female grizzly. Also, an adult male black bear will be much heavier and taller than a young grizzly.

Because grizzly bears and black bears eat similar food, display similar behaviors, and occupy many of the same areas, characteristics such diet, behavior, and habitat use can be even less reliable way to identify them.

Distinguishing Features

The presence of a shoulder hump, the shape of the facial profile, the size and shape of the ears, and the length of the front claws are characteristics that will help you identify bears with far greater accuracy.

Shoulder Hump

Grizzly bears have well-developed shoulder muscles for digging and turning over rocks. These muscles appear as a prominent shoulder hump between the front shoulders, which is visible in profile.

Black bears have no shoulder hump. A black bear's highest point, when it's on all fours, is the middle of the back or the rear.

Grizzly Bear



Shoulder hump

Black Bear



No shoulder hump

Facial Profile

A **grizzly** typically has a concave or dish-shaped profile that extends from between its eyes to the end of its nose. A **black** bear normally has a long, fairly straight profile from forehead to nose tip. The dish-faced profile of the grizzly makes the face appear broader (when seen full front) than that of the black bear; the face and forehead of the black bear appears more round.

Grizzly Bear



Dish-shaped facial profile

Black Bear



Straight facial profile

Ear Shape

Grizzly bears have smaller, more rounded ears, whereas the ears of a black bear appear larger, longer, more erect, and pointed.

Grizzly Bear

Black Bear



Small and rounded ears



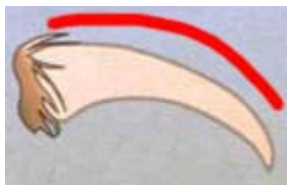
Large and pointed ears

Front claws

Grizzly bears have gently curved, often light colored, 2-4 inch long claws adapted for digging roots and excavating a winter den. The claws of an adult grizzly can be longer than a person's finger.

Black bears have shorter, more sharply curved, dark, claws that are often less than 2-inches long. These claws are well adapted for climbing trees and tearing into rotten logs in search of insects.

Grizzly Bear



Black Bear



Gently curved, 2 - 4 inch long light colored claws



Sharply curved, less than 2 inch long dark colored claws

Tracks

The tracks from the front feet of the grizzly are squarer than the track of a **black** bear. If you take a straight edge and hold it across the track of a grizzly front foot, just in front of the pad and behind the

toe on either side, it will not cross the toe on the other side of the foot. A black bear front track is more rounded and a straight edge will cross the toe on the other side of the foot.

Grizzly Bear



Black Bear



II. Awareness and Avoidance

Being aware of your surroundings is particularly important and will aid in your avoidance of bears. Traveling and camping in bear country is just like traveling in any other hazardous area and it requires that you are constantly gathering data. This data collection begins well before you get on the trail or into camp. Talk to your agency partners and crew leaders about bear activity in your area of operation. Ask them about sightings, encounters between humans and bears, habitat, habituation and quantity of their natural food supply. All of this will help begin to compose a picture of the bear situation in your area. It will also assist you in modifying your group's behavior to minimize the risk of a bear encounter.

Awareness

Consideration the:

Terrain:

- What are the lines of sight?
- Can a bear see our group?
- Is there a possibility of surprising a bear at close range?
- Are there sounds (wind, rain, rapids) that are preventing a bear from hearing our group while still at a distance?
- Are there escape routes for a bear?
- Will a bear feel surprised or cornered?

Weather:

- Which way is the wind blowing?
- Will a bear smell us?
- Is precipitation affecting visibility?

- Are bears in shaded areas because it is hot?

Bear specific info:

- Any signs of scat, tracks, hair, beds, digs, or claw marks? How fresh are they?
- Signs of cubs? How old are they?
- Any odors of rotting meat or the musky smell of nearby bears?
- Mating season?
- Are they eating in preparation for winter?

Food Supply:

- Any that bears were digging for ants or roots? Is there an abundance of berries?
- Are there fish spawning in the area or elk calving?

Human Contact:

- Is this area heavily used and might the bears be habituated?
- Is it hunting season?
- How well educated is your group about traveling and camping in bear areas?

Avoidance

In general, you should avoid bears whenever it is possible, even if the bear is aware of you and is unconcerned. Never approach a bear and leave an area in which you encounter a bear. If you hear vocalizations or see cubs that are unattended, silently leave the area by the same path on which you came and be very cautious and observant.

In Camp

Set up camp 300 feet up hill, up wind and up valley from cooking areas.

- No foods or other scented items in sleeping areas – no exceptions, ever.
- Sleep in different clothes than you use to cook
- Store cooking clothes with other scented items
- Avoid wiping your food soiled hands on your clothes
- Sleep in groups of three or more
- If you've been issued bear spray and it hasn't been discharged, bring it into your sleeping area
- Defecate in designated area close to camp and bring bear spray
- Store used tampons with other scented items. Double or triple bag them.
- Avoid camping near human and game trails

On the trail

- Make noise to avoid surprising them, especially in areas with short lines of sight/dense cover
- Hike in groups of four or more
- If the group is carrying bear spray, give it to the lead person in the group. Carry it in an easily accessible location
- Watch for fresh signs
- Defecate close to the group, carry the bear spray (if you have it), make noise, stay alert
- Give bears in feeding areas as much room as possible
- In dense bear areas – no solo hiking or running, bring groups when using the bathroom, and keep food in backpacks with the group at all times

Food Storage

Bear Boxes/ Knack box

- These are big steel boxes with a locking lid
- Ideal for big groups with a base camp
- There is enough room to organize your food and store all scented items
- Most National Park campsites have a bear box at each campsite or a locally located site within the campground

Bear Containers

- Looks like a piece of 12" plastic PVC pipe with locking lid
- Used for short 2-3 day trips
- Fits inside pack fairly well
- Still needs to be stored away from sleeping area and cooking area at campsites

Hanging systems

- Use gear that has been checked over thoroughly by the person/people using it
- Find suitable area with good anchor points to construct hang
- The hang works best in smaller groups due to the amount of weight that must be hoisted
- Always tie the hang off well and camp at least 100 yards away
- Always remember that bears can climb trees, so leave at least 6ft from anchor to hung objects on both sides

III. Encounters

Remember, most times, bears want to and do avoid humans. However, when bears do encounter in close proximity, these encounters fall into two categories: defensive and non-defensive.

Defensive interactions

- Bear thinks you are a threat to itself, its cubs or its food.
- Usually you approached it and entered into its personal space, surprising or crowding it.
- Most likely will appear agitated and stressed.
- The closer you are too it before it becomes aware of you, more likely it is to react defensively.
- Almost always stop short of contact, fight/flight is triggered.
- Defensive response that results in an attack (physical contact) almost always involves grizzly bears surprised at close range, on a carcass or protecting young. The few defensive attacks by black bears have been females protecting cubs (but these are very rare).

Non-defensive interactions

- A number of different non-defensive motivations that may appear similar to each other:
- Curious bear
- Human-habituated bear
- Food-conditioned bear
- Dominance-testing bear
- Predatory bear

In general, when you encounter a bear that you can't avoid:

- Identify yourself as human to bears you cannot avoid by talking and slowly waving your arms. Try to give the bear your scent.
- Increase your distance from the bear, even if it appears unconcerned.

- Don't run, it could cause the bear to chase you.

If a **bear approaches** you:

- Stand your ground!
- Quickly assess the situation. Is the bear behaving defensively or in some other way?
- Remain calm, attacks are rare.
- Do not run unless you're absolutely sure of reaching safety.
- Group together to appear big. Prepare your deterrent.
- Don't move toward the bear, or stare it in the eyes as it could think you're trying to be aggressive.
- Don't turn your back on a bear or kneel down in front of it.
- Drop something (not food) to distract the bear.

If the bear is **approaching in a defensive manner**:

- Stand your ground. Try to appear non-threatening.
- Don't shout at the bear. Talk to the bear in a calm voice.
- If the bear stops its approach, increase your distance.
- If the bear resumes its approach, stand your ground, keep talking calmly, and prepare to use your deterrent.
- If the bear cannot be deterred and is intent on attack, fall to the ground as close to contact as possible and play dead.
- When the attack stops, remain still and wait for the bear to leave. If an attack is prolonged, it is no longer being defensive.

If the bear is **approaching in a non-defensive manner**:

- Talk to the bear in a firm voice.
- Try to move away from the bear's travel path; that may be all it wants you to do.
- If the bear follows you with its attention directed at you. Stop! Stand your ground and prepare to use your deterrent.
- Act aggressively toward the bear. Let the bear know you will fight if attacked. Shout! Make yourself look as big as possible. Stamp your feet as you take a step or two toward the bear. Threaten the bear with whatever is at hand. A bear that is initially curious or testing you may become predatory if you do not stand up to it. The more the bear persists, the more aggressive your response should be.
- If the bear attacks, use your deterrent and fight for your life. Kick, punch or hit the bear with whatever weapon is available. Concentrate your attack on the face, eyes and nose. Fight any bear that attacks you in your building or tent.
- If you feel the bear was preying on you or your group (**which is rare**) and attacks, aggressively fight back with whatever you have. Aim for the face, eyes and nose.

Remember:

- If a physical attack is **defensive, play dead**. However, don't play dead before you have used all possible means, such as deterrents to prevent an attack.
- If the attack is **predatory, fight back**.

Deterrents

Bear spray

- Used to deter bears at close range.

- It is not 100% effective or a substitute for avoiding an encounter.
- Use only approved bear sprays.
- Carry it ready to use and keep it handy in your tent at night.
- Exercise caution
- Don't spray into the wind/breeze
- Spray from the hip and aim for the face
- Once the spray is discharged, store the can with other scented items as the scent could attract bears

Electric fences

- Used in heavily bear populated areas
- Fence is setup in a perimeter around the food/scented items
- A clean and sanitized camp must still be maintained
- This fence helps to detour curious and wondering bears but will not keep them out if they have a good reason to come in, it works by discharging an electric current and is positioned so the bear's nose (one of it's most sensitive areas) will touch it first.
- All students/leaders will avoid contact with the fence, but if they touch it on accident, it gives a shock, but will not harm them

Guns

A few of our programs will carry firearms due to our agency partner's specific policies there. If used, the leaders will go through training and testing to carry one, students under no circumstances will touch or use this firearm. If you are on one of these crews, leaders, students and parents will be notified by SCA.

To review - How to Stay Safe in Bear Country:

Since SCA's first crew over 50 years ago, our students and leaders have lived and worked in bear country. As you prepare for your upcoming summer, a few key tips to remember about living and working in bear country are:

1. Awareness

Ask yourself these things:

- Does the vegetation impair my line of sight to anticipate bears up close.
- Is there any signs of bears in this area, ie... scat, tracks, claw marks on trees etc...
- Is there any unusual smells in the air such as a dead carcass or a heavy musty smell like a wet dog?
- Always make yourself known in the area by making noise.

2. Avoidance

- Keep a clean camp with food and all scented items in a bear container/box or hang.
- No food or smelly products whatsoever can be in your tent, always make sure they are properly stored.
- Always try to camp with the bear triangle in mind. (Sleep 100 yards from your cooking area and 100 yards from food storage which is 100 yards from both).

3. Encounters

- Most of the time you will come across bears while hiking and they will run away just as fast as you saw them.

- On occasion a bear will wander into your area without noticing you, try to back away the way you came, never running.
- If a bear approaches you, determine if the approach is defensive or non-defensive. Read the attached information provided about how to respond based on the bear's approach. Read this information, know that you will receive bear training specific to your particular crew onsite and ask questions until you are sure you understand what to do.
- Rehearse in your mind what you might do for the various situations, so you can keep yourself safe in bear country.

4. Deterrents

- Bear spray is the most commonly used deterrent and least harmful to the bear. If you will be using bear spray on your crew you will receive training onsite.
- A few crews will carry firearms as part of the agencies policy. Leaders only will have proper training, possession and access during the program.
- Other crews will have electric fences around camp and everyone will be educated about that on site.

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