

# Black Bears: Close Encounters

Black bears are not normally aggressive animals, so attacks on humans are rare. As bear numbers increase and more bear habitat disappears, however, the greater the chances are of encountering a black bear. In North America approximately 45 fatalities have been attributed to black bears since 1900. More than half of those fatalities have happened since 1970. Although historic information regarding black bear attacks in Washington is not well documented, one fatality and three attacks have been recorded.

Bears will usually avoid people, but their size, strength and surprising speed make them a potential danger. Most confrontations with bears are a result of surprise encounters at close range, so take precautions to avoid startling a bear. Remember, because of their keen sense of smell, black bears are attracted to food and odors.



**If you live in or near wooded black bear habitat you can reduce the potential for a black bear conflict by taking these precautions:**

Don't leave food out that bears can get into. Keep pet foods and livestock feed indoors. Store garbage in cans with tight-fitting lids and store cans in your garage or a shed until pick-up day. Wash barbecue grills immediately after use, and keep any fish parts and meat waste in your freezer until they can be disposed of properly. Lastly, enclose any beehives and fruit trees in chain-link or electric fencing where practicable to prevent depredation.

**While recreating in Black Bear habitat you can avoid close encounters by taking the following precautions:**

Hike in small groups and make enough noise to prevent surprising a Black Bear. Avoid hiking alone. Keep small children close to the group, preferably in plain sight just ahead of you. Do not approach dead animals, especially recently killed or partially covered deer and elk. Be aware of your surroundings, particularly when hiking in dense cover or when sitting, crouching or lying down. Look for tracks, scratch piles, and partially covered droppings. Keep a clean camp. Reduce odors that may attract small mammals like raccoons, which in turn attract Black Bears. Store meat, other foods, pet food, and garbage in double plastic bags. Do not leave your pet tied at a campsite, which may also attract Black Bears. Better yet, leave "Rover" at home when camping or hiking.

**To avoid encounters with black bears while hiking and camping:**

Hike in small groups and make your presence known by singing or talking. If approaching likely bear habitat, consider an upwind approach so the bear will smell you and leave the immediate area. Avoid hiking alone, after dark, or with a dog. Dogs may disturb bears and lead them back to you. Keep small children close and on the trail, preferably in plain sight just ahead of you. Be aware of your surroundings, particularly when hiking in forested areas. Look for tracks, droppings and feeding sign, such as over turned rocks, peeled trees or torn-open stumps indicating that bears are in the area. If you find yourself in an active bear area, move through quickly. Keep a clean camp. Put garbage, including soiled diapers and tampons, in bear-proof trash containers where available, or pack it out in double plastic bags. Do not bury or burn your garbage, as bears will still be attracted to the residual smell. Reduce odors that may attract black bears by storing meat, other foods, horse pellets and dog food in double plastic bags. Store double-wrapped food in your car trunk, if possible. Otherwise, put food in a backpack or appropriate container and hang from a tree branch at least 10 feet above the ground and 4 feet out from the tree trunk. Never store food in your tent. When camping, avoid cooking smelly or greasy foods, such as bacon. Sleep at least 100 yards from your cooking area and food storage site. Don't sleep in your cooking clothes and keep your sleeping bag and tent clean and free of food odors. If hunting, hang game meat out of reach of bears, if possible. If not, store meat 100 yards from camp. Dispose of fish entrails by puncturing the air bladder and dropping the entrails in deep water where they will decompose naturally.

Based on their abundance in Washington, if you spend time outdoors your chances of seeing a black bear are fairly good. Should you spot a bear — and it doesn't see you — quickly and quietly leave the immediate area. **Black bears tend to avoid humans, but should you come in close contact with one, here are some tips.**

Stay calm and avoid direct eye contact, which could elicit a charge. Because bears are nearsighted, if one has not caught your scent, it could mistake you for prey. Try to stay upwind and identify yourself as a human by standing up, waving your hands above your head, and talking. The bear will probably leave you alone.

Do not approach the bear, especially if cubs are around. Give the bear plenty of room and slowly back away. Leave the bear an escape route at all times. If you are too close, a black bear may "bluff" charge, although it is highly unlikely the bear would touch you. Because black bears can reach speeds of 30 mph or more, running away is not a wise decision. Running may also stimulate the

bear's instinct to chase.

If you cannot safely move away from the bear and the bear doesn't flee, then try to scare it away by aggressively clapping your hands, or yelling. Black bears can climb trees, fleeing up a tree is not a safe option.

In the unlikely event a black bear attacks you (meaning he thinks you are prey), fight back aggressively using your bare hands or any object you can reach. As a last resort, should the attack continue, protect yourself by curling into a ball or lying flat on the ground on your stomach and playing dead. Do not look up or move until you are certain the bear is gone.

On Saturday, June 9th 2007 a Herron Island resident reported a sighting of a black bear swimming to the island again, you may post the warning and these useful tips from fish and wildlife on the your website.

Thanks

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