**Living in a bear country**

Alaska is a bear country. Recent estimates indicate that 100.000 black bears and more than 30.000 brown bears live in Alaska. Quite an impressive number, especially if compared to the Alaskan human population which is around 740.000 people. In other words, in Alaska there is a bear for every seven people.

It is common knowledge that people have different perspectives on what is dangerous and what is not. Besides the fact that risk perception goes beyond the individual in the sense that it is a social and cultural construct, it is also subjective. For example, while Pascal understands that in Alaska it is necessary to be aware of bears and to take some precautions, Anna is literally terrified by the possibility of encountering a bear.

Since we arrived in Fairbanks, we felt curious and at the same time (very) scared by bears. At every hike, every camping and basically every outdoor activity, thousands of questions have arisen in our mind at a pace that only fear can trigger: where do bears live? Is there the possibility that I find a bear in the forest behind our apartment? Can we go for a run in the forest alone or should we be more careful? What about camping? Can we set up the nice tent that our colleagues gave us for our Alaskan experience (thank you all again!) or should we ask information before? Can we bring food along or is it attracting bears? What are we supposed to do if we meet a bear? How far can we push it? Where does real risk start?

Our bear-fear was partially based on stories told with the misdirected intention of exaggerating reality, and largely based on uncertainty. Uncertainty is intimately related to lack of knowledge. Therefore, we decided to fill this lack by learning more about bears and about living in a bear country. The University of Alaska Fairbanks offers free bear safety courses for students, employees as well as for the community. Yes, it sounds quite an unusual university course! Well, it turned out to be interesting and very useful!

**Black, Grizzly and Polar bears, we have them all!**

Three species of bears inhabit Alaska, black bears, grizzly bears often classified together with brown bears, and polar bears. Black bears are the smallest bears in North America. Adults are around 1.5 meters from nose to tail and weigh on average around 90 kilograms. They live mostly in forested areas and are very good trees climbers. Their main predators are brown bears. Brown bears are bigger than black bears, up to 680 kilograms. However, color and size can be misleading and should not be used to distinguish among bears. Black bears are mainly black, but can also be brown and cinnamon-colored. Brown bears can also be light blond. Here, in the dry interior Alaska, bears can be much lighter than along the coast of Alaska, in agreement with the Gloger’s rule which states that birds and mammals living in drier environments develop in less pigmented forms than those living in wet areas. Other features, results of adaptation, are keys for differentiating bears. Grizzly bears have a more prominent shoulder hump and longer claws than black bears. Long claws are useful for digging roots and small prey, but block brown bears from climbing trees. Conversely, their muscular structure makes them very quick. Brown bears can reach a speed of 60 kilometer per hour, quite fast for a 500-kilogram runner! Black and grizzly bears eat mostly vegetation, but also killed animals, salmons, berries, and insects. While brown bears are found almost everywhere in Alaska, polar bears inhabit the northern polar region. In the spring and summer polar bears live on the edge of the pack ice in the Arctic Ocean, while in the winter they can be found also southern in the Bearing Sea. Polar bears are similar to brown bears in size but have longer necks and smaller heads to more effectively hunt seals when they approach ice holes for breathing. For adaptation reasons, they are very good swimmers and their fur is water repellent. Black and brown bears spend winter in hibernation, while polar bears enter dens mainly if they are pregnant.

**Bear encounters**

Besides mating seasons, bears are quite solitary animals. However, bear encounters do occur. The number of reported encounters between bears and humans in Alaska has increased together with population growth. Data show less than 30 encounters in the 1960s and more than 110 in the 2000s.

Experts classify bears-humans encounters in defensive and non-defensive. Most of the encounters are defensive: bears are surprised by unexpected human presence, they get stressed and act to defend their territory, food or especially their cubs. Non-defensive encounters are much less frequent. Such encounters might occur for multiple reasons: if the bear is human-habituated or food-conditioned, if the bear is curious and get closer to inspect, for dominance testing or, in the worst case, for predatory purposes.

**What to do when you meet a bear**

We can

Interesting information, some statistics … so far so good. But the question is: what should we do if we meet a bear? Here is where the teacher gave us the instructions.

First rule is DO NOT RUN! If you run, the bear will immediately recognize you as a prey and start chasing you. Remember: bears are so much faster than us, even those of us which can run really, really fast. Instead, the first thing to do is to stay calm (really?) and evaluate the situation. If you think that the bear is acting defensively, experts suggest to stand your ground and talk to the bear in calm voice while moving slowly. One should go like: “Hi Bear. Stay calm. Nobody wants to get hurt. Just move away and I will move too”. Let’s suppose you can really stay calm and talk to the bear, which sounds a bit odd, what comes next? If the bear stops approaching, back away slowly. If the bear resumes the approach, stop, stand your ground and keep talking calmly to the bear, while preparing your deterrents. If the bear keeps approaching, use deterrents. If the deterrents fail, you have two possibilities, both quite dramatic. If the bear is a black bear, fight back with all your strength. If the bear is a brown bear, lay on your stomach and play dead, protect your neck with your fingers and remain still until the attack is over and you are absolutely sure that the bear is gone. However, and here comes the super scary stuff, if the bear starts eating you, fight back!

Good news is that deterrents seem to work quite well. Experience shows that bear spray, which is basically pepper spray, is really effective.

Be in a group

These are general tips, proven valid by experience. However, there is evidence that bears are extremely intelligent and have individual personalities.

Isolated bears do not know what we are.

The most important message is to become bear aware!

Bear spray really works

Humans are risk adverse

Bear spray may be more important for an evening run in Fairbanks