

A Framework for Bear Safety Messages in Alaska

Revised in 2017 by the Alaska Interagency Bear Safety Education Working Group



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This document is intended for agency professionals to reference when developing bear safety publications and presentations for the public and staff. This document is not intended to be used in its entirety or verbatim for the public, but is instead meant to be a framework for consistent messaging.

I. Prepare for possible bear encounters.

It is important to learn how to conduct yourself in bear country since you are responsible for your own safety. Your behavior influences the outcome of bear encounters.

Understanding bear behavior and communication can help you react better if you encounter a bear. Many generalizations can be made about bear behavior and while bears are individuals that don't always act the same way under the same circumstance, bear behavior is more predictable than unpredictable.

- **Contact local land managers** (e.g., Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Alaska State Parks, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) regarding rules and information specific to the area you are visiting.
- **Check information boards** at trailheads and other locations for information about recent bear activity and follow the advice or direction on posted notices.
- **Learn about the habitats that bears use**, what foods bears eat and when that food is available. This will help you understand where bears might be and why, but know that bears may show up when and where you least expect them.
- **Develop a safety mindset and a response strategy** BEFORE you have an encounter. Rehearse and discuss what you would do in a bear encounter. This can help you stay calm and overcome the tendency to panic or overreact, either of which can put you in danger. Remember, your response influences the outcome of a bear encounter.
- **Carrying a deterrent is a critical means of defense in bear country.** Practice using it before entering bear country and carry it where it can be deployed within seconds. If carrying bear spray, make sure it is one registered by the EPA for defense against bears and is not expired.

II. Avoid bears while traveling in bear country.

By taking a few simple precautions, you can greatly reduce your chances of encountering a bear.

- **Make noise** by talking, singing or clapping. This may not be necessary continuously, but is critical when visibility and hearing are limited. Do not scream or shriek, as this may startle or confuse a bear.
- **Travel in a group.** Groups of people are usually noisier and less likely to surprise bears. Don't let your group get spread out. Stay in close proximity of each other so everyone is visible and can gather even closer together if a bear is encountered.

- **Use all of your senses** to stay aware of your surroundings. Do not wear headphones or earbuds.
- **Be aware of wind** direction. If the wind is at your back, it will be easier for a bear to catch your scent and avoid you.
- **Slow down and be alert.** This is especially important along streams and rivers (where the noise of rushing water may mask the sounds of your approach) and on blind corners and in thick brush where you cannot see what's ahead.
- **Never approach a bear.** All bears may defend their personal space, food (especially carcasses or fish) and/or offspring. Brown (grizzly) bears can be especially dangerous if they are surprised, or if they are defending a carcass or cubs. Be especially cautious in areas, such as along salmon streams, where a bear could be feeding on fish or defending a fishing spot.
- **Avoid carcasses.** Although a bear may not be at the carcass, it may be lingering nearby. Use all your senses to detect a carcass: if you smell something out of the ordinary, see or hear a congregation of scavenging birds (e.g., ravens, jays, eagles), or see a large, fresh pile of dirt and other debris, you are potentially in danger and should leave the area immediately.
- **Bears use trails and roads.** Set up camp in open areas away from trails, streams and other corridors where bears might travel, or where you see tracks or other sign of bears.
- **Running, biking or other high speed sports in bear country increase risk.** Slow down when you approach blind curves. Avoid areas commonly traveled by bears or where visibility is limited. Recognize your risk of encountering a bear is higher at night or dawn/dusk. When biking in bear country, carry bear spray attached to you, not to your bike or inside your pack. If you are separated from your bike, you'll still have your spray.

III. Avoid attracting and food-conditioning bears.

A food-conditioned bear has learned to associate humans with food (due to having eaten garbage or other human-sources of food). Do not let bears associate you, your camp or your home with food, fish, garbage or other "rewards." If a bear is able to get food from a human, it will likely repeat the behavior, may become dangerous to humans and may need to be killed.

Food-conditioning should not be confused with habituation to humans, which is when bears have become so comfortable around people they have learned to ignore them.

For Camp Settings

- Secure all food, garbage, pet food, bait, fishy clothes, line, tackle and scented items like sunscreen and toothpaste in bear-resistant containers. Most coolers are not designed to be bear-resistant. Another option is to hang items where bears can't reach them. Do not store anything smelly or edible in your tent or in a soft-sided recreational vehicle or trailer.

- In a wilderness setting, separate your cooking, waste water and food storage areas from your sleeping area, while keeping everything in view.
- Portable electric fences may offer more protection, though fencing does not substitute for a clean camp. Consider setting up an electric fence around your aircraft, ATV, snowmachine, or boat.
- Keep your belongings in your immediate control. Do not abandon your unsecured food or other attractants to bears. Bears may also be attracted to fuel cans, tents, backpacks, camp chairs, kayaks, rafts and many other human objects.
- If a bear approaches your campsite directly, assertively defend your camp by yelling, banging pots and pans or using deterrents. Stand in a group if possible and maintain your position. Your goal is to have the bear leave your camp.
- If a bear returns to your camp, consider packing up and leaving the area.

For Homes and Remote Cabins

- Securely store all garbage and freezers inside a building or in a bear-resistant container or shed. A bear-resistant container, while not bear proof, is one that a bear cannot get into easily. If a person can open the container without using hands or tools, or if brute force will open it, then it is not bear-resistant.
*The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee tests and certifies containers; check our reference section for more information.
- Do not put trash on the curb until the morning of garbage pickup. Freeze fish waste and smelly garbage until garbage pickup day.
- Take down all bird feeders including hummingbird feeders when bears are active.
- Be sure to bring uneaten pet food inside when pets are done eating.
- Set up an electric fence around your chicken coop or other livestock.
- Do not leave a meat or fish smoker unattended. If you are planning on leaving, protect fish and meat drying racks and smokehouses with electric fencing.
- Clean BBQ grills with a wire brush after grilling. Empty the grease trap and bring it inside after each use. If possible, store grill inside a garage or shed when not in use.
- Close and lock all doors and windows bears could climb through.
- When leaving a remote cabin, pack out garbage. Consider boarding up the structure with thick wood with nails pointing outward, or protecting it with electrified mats or an electric fence.

- Keep your property and vehicles as clean as possible and reduce attractants. Examples of attractants include: hides, bones, fish, seal oil, bird feeders, dirty barbecue grills, pet food, waste water, smokers, fish tackle, fishing nets, dry racks, petroleum or rubber products, fuel cans and garbage.

IV. How to behave in designated bear-viewing areas.

Bears in designated bear-viewing areas may be habituated or more tolerant of humans. Habituated or tolerant bears show little or no overt reaction to the presence of humans. It may be acceptable for people to be closer to bears in viewing areas than in other bear habitats because of this habituation.

Follow the specific rules for the bear-viewing area you are visiting and also keep the following recommendations in mind:

- Leave your dog and bicycle at home.
- Keep food or flavored beverages in the designated location (or in your pack if there is none), and keep all your belongings under your control.
- Move quietly and slowly in designated areas open to travel, and where bears expect to see you. Note that this is different than in non-viewing areas, where it's important to make noise.
- Stay together as a group to allow bears room to move around you in their intended direction.
- Bears use trails frequently, give them space (do not approach them).
- Firearms are usually unnecessary around habituated or tolerant bears, especially when trained agency personnel are present. Bear spray is a better alternative but recognize bears are often much closer to people than in other settings.

V. How to react when you see a bear.

Your behavior influences the outcome of bear encounters.

- If a bear appears unaware of you and you are able to leave, grab your gear and move away without alerting the bear. Get your deterrent ready, and keep your eyes on the bear.
- If you encounter a bear you cannot avoid, ready your deterrent. Let the bear know you are there but try not to startle it. Face the bear, stand your ground, group up with others and alert the bear by calmly talking. **Your voice is important to help the bear identify you as human.** If a bear cannot tell what you are, it may come closer or stand on its hind legs to get a better look or smell. A standing bear is usually curious, not threatening.
- Let the bear know you are human. Slowly raise your arms overhead so you appear larger, but only do this if you don't need to reach for your deterrent or if you have your deterrent in hand.
- Watch the bear. If the bear approaches, try to determine whether it is acting defensively or non-

defensively. You should continue to stand your ground, but in an encounter, your response will be different depending on the behavior of the bear.

- If you encounter cubs and do not see the mother, do not stand your ground; go back the way you came. Leave the area cautiously as the mother is likely nearby.

Encountering a defensive bear

A bear that you surprise or crowd, especially one with cubs or on a carcass, may feel threatened. The bear may be agitated, and may huff, stomp, make a popping sound with its teeth, salivate profusely or lay its ears back against its head and charge (run at you). Your goal in a defensive encounter is to calm the bear – and yourself – and let the bear know you are not a threat.

- If you have time to respond, stand your ground, ready your deterrent, group up, talk to the bear in a calm voice and watch the bear. Do not run.
- If the bear is stationary, move away slowly while keeping your eyes on the bear.
- If the bear starts to move toward you or charges, stop and stand your ground.
- Let the bear know you are not a threat. Behaving calmly, moving slowly and speaking softly will help de-escalate the situation. Give the bear time to calm down.
- If the bear continues to approach, use your deterrent when the bear is within range.
- If you encounter a bear on a carcass, don't stand your ground, leave the area immediately.

Defensive bear attack

An attack means that a bear has made physical contact with you. Understand that defensive bear attacks can occur so quickly that there is little time to respond. Although both black and brown bears may react defensively in an encounter, black bears rarely attack defensively. When they do, it often involves mother black bears defending their cubs. Most defensive attacks are from brown bears. This is also the most common form of attack by bears on humans.

- If a defensive bear makes contact with you and knocks you to the ground, protect your neck, stomach and face. Lie face down, with hands clasped behind your neck. Spread your legs and elbows for stability so the bear cannot roll you over. Leave your backpack on for protection. Your goal is to have the bear no longer perceive you as a threat. Do not struggle or cry out. Remain motionless for as long as possible even after the bear has left the area. Moving too soon can provoke another assault so make sure the bear is long gone.
- If the bear rolls you over, attempt to keep rolling until you are on your stomach.
- If the attack is prolonged and the bear starts feeding on you, it may no longer be considered defensive but may have turned into a predatory attack. In this case, fight back.

Encountering a non-defensive bear

Bears that are not feeling threatened may approach you for a number of reasons. You may be on the bear's travel route, or it may be curious, testing dominance, habituated, food-conditioned or potentially predatory. A curious or bold bear is usually silent, ears up, eyes focused on you, and approaching or circling. Either black or brown bears may approach in this manner. Your goal in a non-defensive encounter is to let the bear know you are human, and that you will become more assertive as the bear persists. Let the bear know you will fight to defend yourself.

- Your initial response to all bear encounters should be the same: Stand your ground, ready your deterrent, group up and watch the bear. Stay calm and talk to the bear in a firm voice.
- Do not play dead! If you panic, run or play dead with a non-defensive bear, you risk the encounter turning into a predatory attack.
- If you're on the bear's route, you may be blocking it. If this is the case, try to move out of its way, while keeping an eye on the bear.
- If the bear persistently approaches, follows you and stays focused on you, it's time to assert your dominance and become aggressive. Stand your ground and don't retreat; shout, make yourself appear large, let the bear know you will fight, use any non-lethal deterrent such as bear spray, or throw rocks or sticks. Drive the bear off.
- There isn't any hard and fast rule regarding when to shoot a persistent and aggressive bear, it's a personal decision. If you do use a firearm, shoot at close range and aim to kill the bear.

Predatory bear attack

Predatory attacks are rare. These are bears that are treating humans as prey, or attacks that develop from other encounters based on how you respond. For example, a bear may approach a human to test its dominance, and if a person is not assertive with the bear, it may elicit predatory behavior by the bear. A prolonged defensive attack can also turn into a predatory attack.

- If a bear deliberately approaches and makes contact with you in a situation that does not appear defensive, aggressively fight off the bear with any means available.
- Fighting the bear off is also warranted when a prolonged defensive attack becomes predatory and the bear begins feeding on you.
- Fight any bear that breaks into an occupied tent or building.
- Concentrate on the bear's face or muzzle with any potential weapon you have.

VI. Prevention and reaction to special circumstances.

Keep children close to adults in bear country.

- Travel in groups of three or more, including an adult.
- Stay with adults; children should not hike far ahead on trails.

- Teach children the proper responses to bear encounters, which are the same as they are for adults.

Encountering cubs, yearlings and mother bears.

- Don't over-react to curious cubs or yearlings as this may trigger a defensive response by the mother bear. Cubs or yearlings may be curious and pushy, and sometimes will approach you. They may be experimenting with boundaries and dominance, but they are not necessarily being aggressive.
- Stay calm, stand your ground, ready your deterrent and calmly talk to the bear.
- If with a group, slowly group up with others, do not shout or act aggressively.

Dogs affect bear interactions.

Interactions between dogs and bears depend on many variables such as the size, age and behavior of the dog, if it is restrained or not and whether it is a bear with cubs.

- A dog can alert you to the presence of a bear. However, dogs can attract bears as something to be investigated, especially by young bears.
- Dogs have been successful in driving bears away. However, an uncontrolled dog could also agitate a bear by challenging or attacking and then fleeing back to you, bringing the bear with it. Keep your dog under control at all times.

Anglers can reduce bear conflicts by handling their fish carefully.

Bears are attracted to wounded or flopping fish, as well as fish remains. Do not allow a bear to obtain fish from you. A bear that obtains fish from a person is more likely to approach people in the future.

- If a bear is near enough to see or hear a fish splashing, stop fishing.
- If a bear shows up while you have a fish on the line, loosen your drag so it won't splash, or cut the line. Do not land the fish.
- Immediately stun the fish you catch, and then bleed it into the water by cutting its gills. This improves the quality of the meat and reduces the amount of blood as an attractant to bears.
- Don't let a bear get your fish. If you must use a stringer, be sure to stay near enough that you can pick up the fish if you see a bear approaching. In some areas, local regulations require you to keep stringers and coolers within a specific distance so fish and human food don't attract bears. Be sure to check with land management agencies for regulations.
- The remains of fish filleted in the field may attract bears. When cleaning fish, do not leave entrails on the bank. Toss into deep, fast-moving water or dispose of at designated cleaning stations. If you do filet fish in the field, cut the carcass into pieces small enough to easily be carried away by the current.

Hunters can reduce bear conflicts by handling their game carefully.

Hunters are at higher risk than others traveling in bear country because hunting requires silence and stealth. In addition, if a hunter shoots or harvests an animal, the wounded animal or its remains may attract bears.

- Hunters will be carrying a firearm or bow. Consider carrying a second deterrent such as bear spray and have it readily accessible.
- Be aware that when using game calls for deer, moose or other animals, you may also call in bears.
- Ideally, two people should do field dressing, with one of them keeping a sharp look-out for bears.
- Don't create a blood trail back to your camp. Pack, do not drag, all the salvaged meat and other legally required for salvage parts of the animal to the area where you will hang or store your meat.
- Bears typically will go for the entrails first. If you have to make multiple trips to retrieve game, move edible meat and salvaged portions away from the gut pile, to an area with good visibility. Use flagging tape to mark the entrails and the meat cache and likely approaches to it. When you come back for your second load of meat, you will know exactly where your attention needs to be directed. Flagging also will get the attention of other hunters who happen onto the kill site.
- In camp, cache your meat out of reach of bears if possible or cache the meat away from your camp, with a clear line of sight between the camp and meat cache. Portable electric fences are an inexpensive method of protecting your meat.
*See ADF&G section in Part VIII for a link to information about electric fences.
- Treat clothes soaked with blood or guts the same as any other attractant. Do NOT put them in your tent or wear them to bed. Leave soiled clothes with the meat cache.

VII. Addressing common myths.

- Myth – Bears always avoid people.
Fact – Bear will not always try to avoid people. A bear may approach people because it is curious, testing dominance, habituated, food-conditioned or potentially predatory.
- Myth – Bears are blood-thirsty animals that want to kill people.
Fact – Bear attacks are rare, but do occur for both defensive and non-defensive reasons. A bear may defend itself or may approach people because it is curious, testing dominance, habituated, food-conditioned or potentially predatory.
- Myth – When a bear stands up, it is threatening.
Fact – A bear may stand on its hind legs to get a better look or to pick up your scent if it cannot tell what you are.
- Myth – You should avoid making direct eye contact in a bear encounter.
Fact – It's important to watch the bear so you can assess the situation. In non-defensive situations, look at the bear, stand tall and maintain an air of confidence.
- Myth – Climb a tree to increase distance between you and the bear.
Fact – Both black and grizzly bears can and will climb trees.

- Myth – Using ammonia or moth balls can prevent bears from getting into garbage.
Fact – Household products such as these don't work.
- Myth – Women who are menstruating are in greater danger of a bear attack.
Fact – There has been no evidence linking menstruating women and bear attacks, but consider soiled menstrual products a potential attractant and keep secure from bears.
- Myth – Fight a black bear, play dead with a brown bear.
Fact- Your response should be based on the motivation of the bear. You must pay attention to the bear's behavior to know how to respond.
- Myth – When you encounter a bear, lie down and play dead.
Fact – Laying down is a last resort when a defensive bear makes physical contact with you. It is rarely necessary.
- Myth – Bears defend territories.
Fact – Bears defend personal space. Your goal is to give bears plenty of space.

VIII. Resources

Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation

- Living with Bears- (bear safety, bear resistant containers, bears and human food)
www.alaskabears.alaska.gov
- Bears in Alaska- species profiles
www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=animals.listmammals
- Electric Fences as Bear Deterrents- demonstration videos
www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.bearfences
- Bear Spray Demonstration for Hunters 60-second video
<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=multimedia.embeddedvideo&videoID=79843427>
- Know Your Bear Facts, Interagency bear safety brochure translated in nine languages
www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.bearcountry
- If you kill a bear in defense of life or property (DLP)
www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livingwithbears.conflicts

Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (Western states of Idaho, Montana, Washington and Wyoming)

- **IGBC certified bear-resistant products**
<http://igbconline.org/food-storage-regulations/>

National Park Service

- Bear Safety in Alaska's National Parks
<https://www.nps.gov/glba/planyourvisit/upload/bearsafe.pdf>
- Bear Safety for Anglers in Alaska Brochure
<https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/nature/upload/Angler-Fishing-Brochure-2013-TV.pdf>

- Bear Safety in Glacier Bay National Park
<https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/nature/bear-safety.htm>
- Guidelines for Bear Encounters in any National Park
<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bears/safety.htm>

United States Forest Service

- Bears of Alaska
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r10/plants-animals/?cid=FSEPRD500233>
- Know Before you go- Be Bear Aware
<https://www.fs.fed.us/visit/know-before-you-go/bears>

Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife

- EPA certified bear spray- how to know and identify
http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/files/BearSpray_SafetyforPeople_SafetyforBears.pdf

IX. Appendices

Appendix A - Wildlife Safety Training Guide for Staff (2016), Alaska Department of Fish & Game.

- Bear deterrents and hazing/aversive conditioning, pages 18-19.
- Types of bear deterrents and detection systems, page 25.
- Bear spray overview, use and practice, pages 28-30.
- How stress affects your ability to respond in a bear encounter, page 17.

Appendix B - Bear Deterrent and Repellent Product Sources, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Alaska Region.

Appendix C - Hopkins, J., S. Herrero, R. Shideler, K. Gunther, C. Schwartz, and S. Kalinowski. 2010. A proposed lexicon of terms and concepts for human-bear management in North America, *Ursus* 21(2).