

# Bear Safety

*Camping • Hiking • Fishing*



Be BearSmart

[www.bearsmart.alberta.ca](http://www.bearsmart.alberta.ca)

Alberta  
Government

## What you should know about Alberta bears

### The bear necessity

- Bears live to eat, and will eat almost anything.
- Bears need to consume up to 25,000 calories a day. A diet of natural foods is 85 to 90 percent plants and berries and 10 to 15 percent insects and mammals.
- Bears use their intelligence, curiosity and keen sense of smell in a constant search for new food sources.
- Bears will overcome their natural wariness of people to take advantage of the easy meals we provide when we carelessly store our food, garbage or pet food.
- Bears have good memories. They remember the skills they learn to access food in human-use places, such as how to break into containers, vehicles or buildings.
- Bears have even been known to consume petroleum-based products like fuel, oil and jerry cans.

***Be BearSmart: store your food and garbage where bears can't access them.***



## The problem with 'problem bears'

Bears will consume any food they can find, even if the food is found in a human-use place or is not a natural part of bear's diet. Once bears learn to associate humans and human-use places with easy, high-calorie meals, it is difficult to prevent them from seeking out these food sources in the future. These bears become 'problem bears.'

Everyone hiking, camping, fishing or cycling in bear country has a role to play in preventing Alberta's bears from becoming 'problem bears.'

## If a bear is a problem, why not just relocate it?

In some cases, bears that have learned to find food in human-use places will be moved to other locations. Relocating a 'problem bear' may offer enough time to remove the food or other items that had first attracted the bear. However, this is not a long-term solution.

Relocation is hard on the bear, lowers its chance of survival and places a heavy demand on human and financial resources. Once relocated, bears often continue their problem behaviour and sometimes return to the site they were removed from.



*The best way to solve a 'bear problem' is to not create one in the first place.*



## Grizzly Bears

- have a pronounced shoulder hump
- may have silver or light-tipped guard hairs on their head, hump and back
- have ears that are rounded and appear smaller overall
- have claws that are longer (approximately 7.5 cm to 10 cm long), that often have a light-coloured strip along the top
- leave tracks with toe pads set in a relatively straight line and claw imprints 5 cm to 7.5 cm in front of the toe pads



## Black Bears

- have no hump between their shoulders
- appear more uniform in colour than grizzlies
- have more pointed or noticeable ears
- have claws that are usually black and relatively short (2.5 cm long)
- leave tracks with toe pads that form a noticeable arc, and claw imprints that are often not visible or much closer to the toe pads



## How to be BearSmart when hiking, camping, fishing or cycling

Take friends or family – it's safer to travel in groups.  
Before you leave, agree on a plan for dealing with wildlife encounters.

*Heading into bear territory?*



### See the signs

Remember that bears are so focused on eating and the protection of their young that they may not be diligent in avoiding people. The responsibility to prevent human-bear encounters is on those recreating in bear country.

*Don't wear headphones or anything else that may interfere with your ability to detect nearby wildlife.*

Watch for signs of bear activity. If the signs you see look fresh, leave the area, watching for the bear until you've reached a place of safety.



Bear scat full of buffalo berries, a common food source in late summer



Bear scat full of vegetation, a common food source in spring and early summer



Crows, ravens or magpies – may be lingering over an animal carcass that a bear could be feeding on



A rolled rock – left by a bear trying to get at the bugs and grubs that live underneath



Black bear track



Grizzly bear track



Carcass covered by earth



Dug-up ant hill



Dogwood bent by bears eating the berries from it

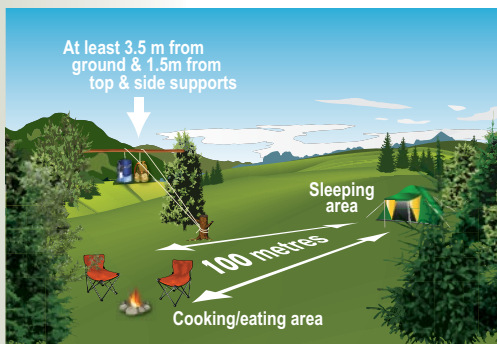
Be extra cautious when hiking, cycling or fishing at these times, when bear encounters are more likely:

- When noise levels are high due to running water (near rivers and streams), wind or heavy rain
- At dusk, night or dawn
- Where sightlines are short because of heavy cover, bends in trails, or when approaching hills



## BearSmart Camping

- Choose your campsite wisely. Set up camp away from the places bears use as travel corridors or food sources, like rivers, lakeshores, shrubs or berry patches.
- Pick campsites that have good lines of sight. This will allow you and the bear to see each other before a close encounter happens.
- Arrange tents, trailers and vehicles so there is enough room between them for a visiting bear to make a quick and easy escape.
- Store food, toiletries and the clothes you wore when cooking or fishing in bear-resistant containers and keep them at least 100 meters away from where you are sleeping. Don't bring them into your tent.
- Store garbage in bear-resistant containers and pack it out.
- Never abandon, bury or partially burn food scraps. Bears will be able to smell the lingering food odours. Burn scraps completely to ashes.
- Be cautious when moving around the camp at night. Carry your flashlight and bear spray, and make enough noise to alert visiting wildlife of your presence.
- Secure the perimeter of your camp by setting up an electric fence.
- Use canned or dried foods (they have less odour).



- Cooking and cleaning should also be done at least 100 meters away from your tent. Wash cooking equipment immediately and dispose of dishwater 100 meters away from your campsite.
- In your tent, keep your bear spray and flashlight where you can reach them easily.



## BearSmart Hiking

- Make noise. A loud shout every few minutes is more effective than bear bells.
- Travel in groups, with your dog on its leash and the children in between the adults. Don't let anyone fall behind or run ahead.



## BearSmart Cycling

- The relative speed and quiet of a bicycle increase the potential for a bear encounter. Make as much noise as you can, and be extra cautious when coming up to blind corners or through areas with berry patches.



## BearSmart Fishing

- If leaving the beaten path to find your favourite fishing spot, make noise, and be watchful for the animals that may be using the bush as cover.
- Remember that lakes, rivers, and streams are relatively high-traffic areas in the wild. Both humans and wildlife use them in the same way: for food, water and as travel corridors. Also remember that humans and wildlife may have a more difficult time hearing the signs warning of the other's approach, as the flowing water can be loud.
- Stay near your friends and keep an eye on them.
- Seal your catch in a plastic bag and clean the fish away from your camp.



## Bear Encounters – NOW WHAT?



***When you see a bear, the most important thing to remember is to stay close to those you're with and DO NOT RUN.***

All bears are individuals, so each bear encounter will be unique. Serious attacks are rare, but you must always be BearSmart when in the wild.

All bears have a 'personal space' and feel threatened when this space is invaded. How they react to the threat is not always predictable and will depend on the situation at hand and the character of the individual bear.

If you're in your tent and you suspect you're being attacked by a bear, fight back.

### **Bear encounters – without bear deterrents.**

Watch what the bear is doing and respond accordingly.

#### **The bear is in the distance.**

- DO NOT RUN and do not yell at the bear.
- Move in close to those you are with and back away slowly from the area, without provoking the bear. Continue to watch for the bear until you've reached a place of safety.

**The bear is closer and standing on its hind legs, woofing, snorting, clacking its jaws, or pounding the ground with its front paws.**

- The bear is telling you that it is uneasy and wants you to leave. Show the bear that you are a human - not a prey animal - and not a threat. Wave your arms slowly and speak calmly to the bear.
- DO NOT RUN.
- Back away slowly, watching for the bear until you've reached a place of safety.

**The bear charges.**

- The bear charges to communicate that it wants you to leave its space. The majority of these charges do not end in contact.
- DO NOT RUN.
- If the bear makes contact, let the bear know that you are not a threat. Lie down on your belly, with your nose to the ground and your fingers laced over the back of your neck. Anchor your toes into the ground. This position will help protect your vital organs and prevent the bear from rolling you over on to your back.
- Once you suspect the bear has left, get up slowly, watching for the bear. If the bear has not left the area, slowly resume the position. Do not jump up or start yelling – doing so can provoke the bear.

**You've spoken to the bear but it continues to follow you, quiet and staring intensely, or closes the distance.**

- This bear might be overly curious, indifferent, testing its dominance or trying to assess whether you have, or are, a food source.
- DO NOT RUN.
- You must show this bear that it is not welcome and that you are not easy prey. Shout at the bear and make yourself look big by standing on a rock or a log and waving your arms.
- If it makes contact, fight back. If you are with others, they should fight back too.

## **Bear encounters – with a noisemaker and bear spray**

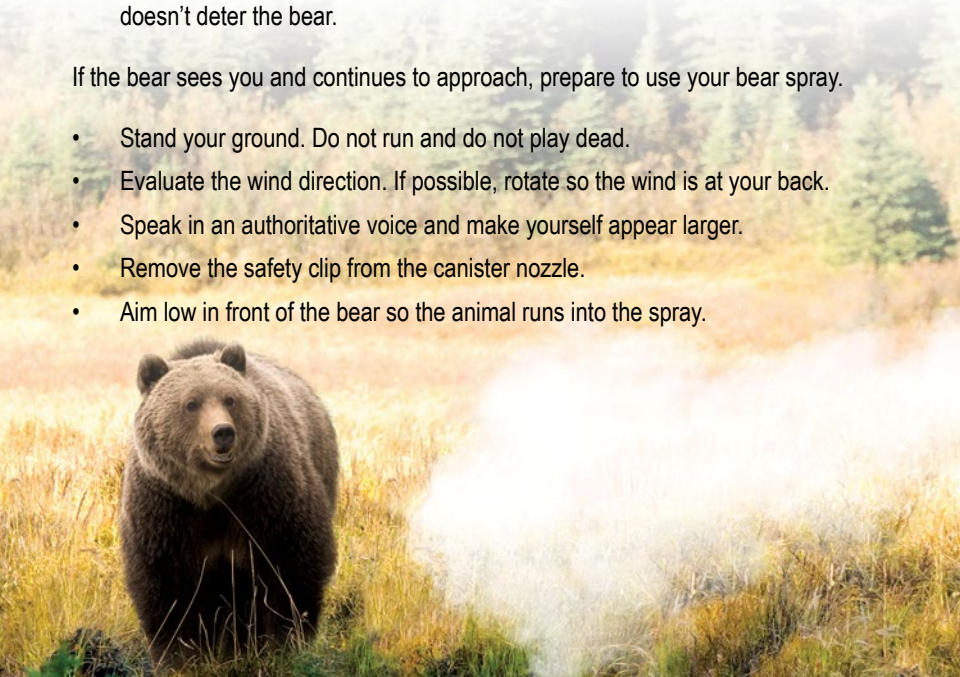
Bear spray is a proven deterrent, but you must know how to use it, and keep it on you in a belt or chest holster, not in your back pack.

The bear is in the distance and is approaching you or your camp.

- Use your air horn or bear banger to scare the bear off its path. Keep in mind that if the bear has heard such a noise before, it may continue to approach. Bears that are initially scared away may later return.
- Before using noisemakers, be sure to assess the situation. Make sure the surroundings are clear of people and the bear has an obvious way out. A bear that's been startled by a noisemakers may not be able to avoid groups of people as it flees the area.
- Do not use bangers or screamers in dry forest conditions. They can cause a fire.
- Do not shoot the noise deterrent directly at the bear.
- Ensure bangers explode between you and the bear. A banger that explodes behind the bear may startle it so the bear runs up in your direction.
- Be prepared to defend yourself with bear spray in case the noisemaker doesn't deter the bear.

If the bear sees you and continues to approach, prepare to use your bear spray.

- Stand your ground. Do not run and do not play dead.
- Evaluate the wind direction. If possible, rotate so the wind is at your back.
- Speak in an authoritative voice and make yourself appear larger.
- Remove the safety clip from the canister nozzle.
- Aim low in front of the bear so the animal runs into the spray.





If the bear is at 9 to 15 meters and continues to approach:

- Fire a ½ second warning blast. The noise of the bear spray being deployed may be enough to deter the bear. If not, the warning blast creates a cloud of bear spray between you and the bear.

If the bear is at 6 to 9 meters, and continues to approach:

- Fire in continuous 1 to 2 second bursts. Aim slightly downward toward the bear's head.

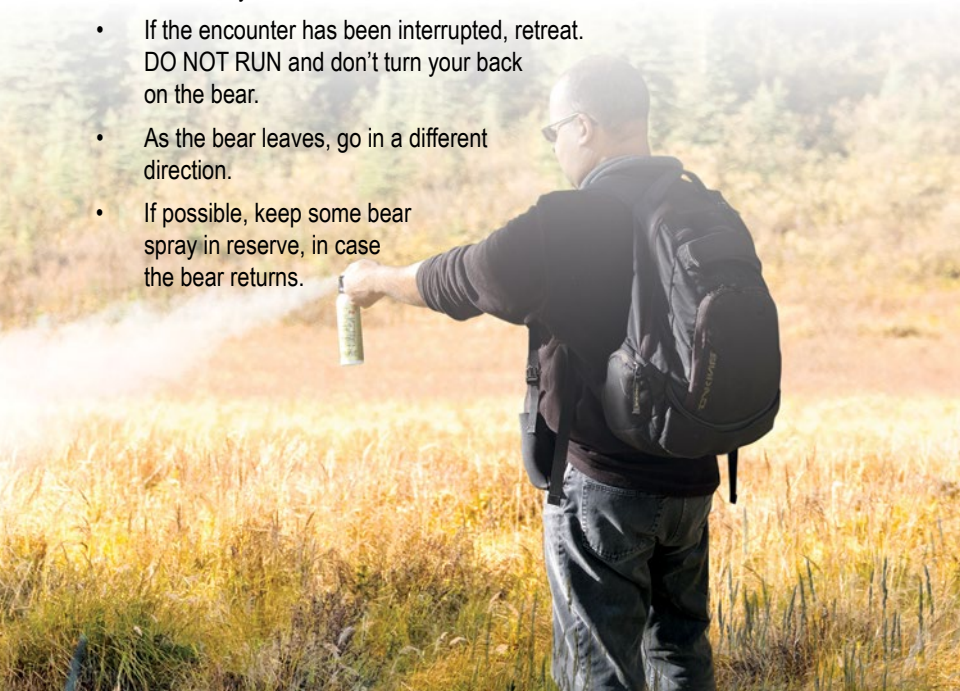
If the bear is at 0 to 6 meters and continues to approach:

- Fire in continuous 1 to 2 second bursts, aiming at the bear's head or into the nose and mouth until it leaves.

After spraying:

- Hold your breath.
- Be sure to move out of the bear's way.
- If the encounter has been interrupted, retreat. **DO NOT RUN** and don't turn your back on the bear.
- As the bear leaves, go in a different direction.
- If possible, keep some bear spray in reserve, in case the bear returns.

Bears are normally wary of people and will leave if they know you are in the area.



## Bear Deterrents 101



### 1. Bear Spray

#### *Does it work?*

- In a study of Alaska bear encounters, it was found that 98% of those who used bear spray were uninjured by the bear. The remaining 2% received only minor injuries that required no hospitalization.
- It can deter bears in three different ways:
  - The active ingredient (oleoresin capsicum) irritates the eyes, nose and lungs, causing severe but temporary blindness and breathing restriction.
  - The unusual sound and sight of deployed bear spray can sometimes be enough to startle a bear off its course.
  - Having bear spray provides people with a tool for responding appropriately in a bear encounter. Those who use bear spray are less likely to resort to other, potentially dangerous responses, such as running away.
- Bear spray is an essential part of your outdoor gear, but having it doesn't mean that you can forego other BearSmart practices. Even when carrying bear deterrents, it's essential to stay alert and diligent in preventing bear encounters.

## ***Buying bear spray***

- Be sure the canister is labelled “for deterring bear attacks.”
- The canister should weigh at least 225 grams (7.9 ounces).
- Check the canister’s expiry date and replace it when necessary. If the bear spray was purchased outside of Canada, it may not state the expiry date. In this case, check directly with the manufacturer to find out how long the bear spray will be effective.
- Be sure to purchase a belt or chest holster to carry your bear spray.



## ***Practice, practice, practice***

- It’s important to understand the range and force of your bear spray, as well as how to deploy it quickly.
- Practice removing your bear spray from its holster until you can retrieve it quickly.
- It’s best to practice using bear spray with an expired canister. Keep in mind, however, that outdated spray canisters may not have the same pressure as new ones. You can also practice with an inert canister, which has the same spraying pressure but not the hot pepper ingredient.
- A 225 gram canister contains enough bear spray for about 8 seconds of use. If practicing with a canister that you’ll be carrying later, remember to conserve as much as you can. If you suspect that you have used more than 1/3 of your bear spray, buy a new canister to carry in bear country.
- Practice using bear spray in a location outside of bear country. Residual bear spray has been known to attract bears, so do not practice using bear spray when you’re on the trail or at camp.
- If you discharge bear spray from your canister, be sure to clean off the nozzle so bear spray doesn’t get on your clothes, gear, body or in your eyes.

### ***Storing bear spray***

- The safety clip should always be in place when the spray is not in use.
- Keep the canister away from things that could crush or puncture it.
- Never leave the canister in direct sunlight or anywhere temperatures can become very cold or very hot. Don't store the bear spray in your vehicle or use spray that you suspect has been frozen.
- Special regulations apply to transporting bear spray in aircraft. Always talk to the airline/pilot before taking bear spray on your flight.

### ***First aid if you're accidentally sprayed***

- Anybody who's been accidentally sprayed should be moved from the contaminated area as soon as possible.
- Flush exposed skin with cold water and soap. Mild, non-oil-based soaps, such as baby soaps, are best.
- Do not rub exposed areas. Pat dry with a towel.
- To flush spray out of your eyes, place your head under water and open your eyes every few seconds. Do not rub your eyes. Remove contact lenses.
- Do not apply lotions or creams to the exposed area.
- If the effects of the spray do not go away in 30 to 45 minutes, seek medical attention.





## 2. Noisemakers

The most effective noisemaker in bear country is you. Talking or singing loudly can help prevent surprise encounters with wildlife. With enough warning of your approach, wildlife should have enough time to remove themselves and their young from the area.

### *Types of noisemakers*

- **Air horns** are easily carried in bear country. They create a loud, piercing sound of more than 120 decibels.
- **Banger cartridges** are available for pen-launchers, .22 calibre launchers and 12-gauge launchers. They travel 20 to 100 meters (66 to 328 feet) then create a loud bang.
- **Screamers** are similar to bangers except that they create a loud, continuous screeching noise for approximately 100 meters (328 feet). Their flight pattern is erratic, so be extremely cautious when using them.



**What about bear bells?** Bear bells seem like a cheap and easy bear deterrent option, but likely don't make enough noise to actually alert wildlife to your arrival. If you choose to carry bear bells, remember that it's essential to be BearSmart in all other ways.



### **Noisemaker safety**

- Noisemakers that fire banger or screamer cartridges should be stored and carried unloaded.
- Always be aware of the line of fire.
- Be aware of the potential for ricochet.
- Never point or fire a noisemaker projectile at a person or an animal. This can cause injury or even death.
- Ensure you are not using bangers or screamers that are old, or that have been wet or altered in any way. They may explode prematurely and hurt someone.



### 3. Electric fencing

Portable electric fences have proven to be effective at barring bears from camp sites. Modern fencing systems are light-weight, use AA or D batteries and often weigh less than 4 kilograms (10 pounds).

- The fence material should consist of metal wire or interwoven poly-metal wire.
- A variety of insulators and lightweight plastic or fibreglass stakes or posts are available. If insulators are temporarily attached to trees, care must be taken to not injure the tree, and all materials should be removed when leaving the site.
- The fence voltage should be tested regularly to ensure proper grounding. Water can be poured in the area of the ground rod if required.
- Electric fencing must be properly installed and regularly maintained in order to be effective.



## **What you should know about cougars in Alberta**



Cougars are expanding their range in Alberta and can be encountered in many areas of the province.

- Cougars are extremely wary of humans and will not normally make their presence known to humans in the wild.
- Unlike bears, cougars will rarely attack humans to defend their young or a food source. Also unlike bears, cougars are rarely attracted to human food or garbage.
- Cougars are efficient hunters whose primary prey is deer, elk, moose, sheep and other mammals.

### **How to prevent problems with cougars in the wild**

- Practicing BearSmart habits will help you prevent unpleasant encounters with cougars as well.
- Cougars often see dogs as prey animals. If you are hiking, camping or fishing, consider leaving your dog at home. If you must bring it with you, for the dog's safety, keep it close and on-leash.

***Cougars are rarely attracted to human food or garbage.***



## **You see a cougar – now what?**

Watch what the cougar is doing and respond accordingly

### **The cougar is at a distance and not focused on you**

- Don't provoke it.
- Gather everyone in close, especially children and dogs.
- Back away slowly, but DO NOT RUN.

### **The cougar is getting closer, and is hissing, snarling or staring intently and tracking your movements**

- Show the cougar you are not a prey animal and will fight back.
- DO NOT RUN and do not turn your back. Back away.
- Shout at the cougar and make yourself look bigger by waving your arms and opening your jacket.
- Use your noisemaker and bear spray.



## **The cougar makes contact**

- Do not play dead. Fight back, using anything you can find as a weapon. Aim at the cougars face and eyes.
- Continue using your bear spray.
- If you're knocked down, get up. Don't stop fighting.
- After the cougar has left, continue to watch for it until you reach a place of safety.



## Signs of cougar activity

Cougar track, showing no claw imprints



Cougar scat, with tracks and scrape marks around it



A cougar's kill: a dead deer covered with leaves, grass and forest debris



If a bear or other wildlife is a public safety concern, call the local Fish and Wildlife office at 310-0000 or, if after regular business hours, call the Report a Poacher line at 1-800-642-3800.

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