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Close Encounters with Grizzlies

Bears are naturally shy and typically avoid humans. Encounters usually occur because the bear has been attracted by food, garbage, or other odors; or has been surprised by a hiker. The most common causes of an attack are a person surprising a bear at close range, approaching a female with cubs, or getting close to a carcass or other food source. It is best to educate yourself about bears and learn to avoid encounters: don't take actions that attract bears; know signs of bears and steer clear of them; and know how to properly alert bears to your presence. But if you do inadvertently encounter a bear, here are some tips for ensuring the safety of both yourself and the bear.

If you see a bear: You should always maintain a safe distance and behave in a non-threatening manner. Most human encounters with bears do not result in physical attacks. In fact, injuries are seldom caused by bears; it is more common that a bear is unnecessarily injured by a fearful human. Most bears will try hard to avoid people.

If you surprise a bear at close range: Drop a non-food item (like a hat or bandana) on the ground in front of you and slowly back away, speak in a soft monotone, and avoid eye contact. The bear may stand on its hind legs to get a better view, or huff and growl as a threat display. In most cases, the bear will then leave.

If you encounter a sow with cubs: A female protecting her cubs is the most dangerous of all bears. Try to create as much distance between you and the bears. Do not turn your back, but slowly leave the area immediately if you can.

Never run from a bear: A bear can run 50 yards in 3 seconds, or up to 40 mph, faster than a race horse for short distances, and faster than any human, uphill or downhill. Running away will only encourage the bear to chase you.

If the bear charges: Your first option is to remain standing. Charging bears often veer away, run past you, or stop abruptly at the last second. This is called a bluff charge, and means the bear is warning you to leave the area.

If you have bear spray: Carrying pepper spray and knowing how to use it properly is the best deterrent against a bear attack, and can lessen the duration or seriousness of an attack that occurs. *Professional wildlife biologists who work in the field depend on bear spray and trust it as an effective tool to prevent injury to both people and bears.*

If you have a firearm: Wounding a bear, even with a large caliber gun, can put you in far greater danger. Most mortally wounded bears live long enough to inflict serious injury upon their attacker. Correct use of pepper spray has proven to be more effective than use of a firearm in deterring an attack and preventing serious injury.

If the bear makes physical contact: Drop to the ground, lie face down, and assume a cannonball position. Leave your pack on, cover your neck and head with your arms and hands, and curl up to protect your stomach. Play dead.

If a bear attacks you at night in your tent: It is very rare for a bear to become predatory, or to attack a person in a tent. If this occurs, the bear is probably seeking food, rather than trying to neutralize a threat; in this case, FIGHT BACK to show the bear you are dangerous and that an easy meal cannot be found there.

Report all encounters: If you do encounter a bear, report it as soon as possible to local authorities, or the nearest forest, park, or game and fish department office. Your report may help prevent someone else from being hurt.