



Norman Lightfoot

Bear Facts

Seeing a wild black bear is a memorable event, however, a fleeting glimpse is the most common sighting of this powerful animal. When bears and people come face-to-face, problems can occur.

Over the years, bears and humans have met countless times in Ontario. Hundreds of bears have been killed because they became a destructive nuisance. Tragically, there have also been a number of human fatalities.

You can protect yourself, your belongings and Ontario's black bears if you know some basic bear biology and take precautions when in bear country. Ontario Nature has prepared this fact sheet to help you become bear aware.

You are in bear territory in most parts of central and northern Ontario.

Introducing *Ursus americanus*

Adult male black bears weigh between 120 and 280 kilograms (as much as three large men). Adult females are smaller, weighing anywhere from 45 to 182 kilograms. Bears are immensely powerful animals: an adult male black bear can kill a deer with a swipe of its paw. In spite of their incredible strength, black bears are surprisingly agile and have been clocked at speeds of up to 55 km/h.

Black bears can live for 20 years or more but few of them do. Many die at the hands of humans, from hunting, vehicle collisions and the killing of "nuisance" bears. Natural causes of death include rival bears, other wildlife (e.g., wolves) and among cubs, abandonment or starvation.

Family ties

Like humans, bears invest a lot of time and energy in their young. Female black bears usually have their first litter at about six years of age, and breed only every two or three years. A litter of one to four cubs is born in late December or early January while the

female is in her den. Cubs usually stay with their mother for a year and a half. Female cubs may then continue to have access to the mother's feeding grounds. The young males disperse, however, and wander over long distances for the next few years until reaching sexual maturity, at which point they compete with other males for territory.

The ultimate omnivore

Black bears search constantly for food to feed their young and build fat for their long winter hibernation. Approximately 75 percent of the black bear diet consists of twigs, leaves, shoots, buds, berries, roots, grasses and nuts. Insects, fish, carrion, and the spring-born young of moose and deer make up the remainder. However, bears are opportunistic feeders and will take advantage of any food source. This can bring them into contact with people, crops, campsites and garbage dumps.



A bear is checking you out when it stands on its hind legs to get a better look.

Ontario's black bear forest

Bears inhabit forests of the Bruce Peninsula and most of central and northern Ontario. They prefer forests with a variety of berry-producing shrubs and trees of different ages. This habitat provides food, winter den sites and refuge.

Individual bears can range over large areas. Males travel most widely, covering the home ranges of several females and their cubs. Immature males are nomadic, and often encounter people during their travels.

You are more likely to attract bears if you are careless with food and trash.



Close encounters

The black bear has an acute sense of smell and can detect carrion or other food at great distances. Bears will often smell (or hear) humans and retreat before being spotted. Encounters can occur, however, when bears are caught off-guard by people approaching from downwind, or when they are attracted by human odours.

If you meet a bear at close range, remember some basic bear behaviour. In most cases the bear will leave, but every situation is unique.

Bear behaviour

A bear is checking you out when it:

- stands on its hind legs to get a better look;
- waves its head from side to side, sniffing the air to catch your scent;
- makes low-pitched, non-aggressive grunting sounds.

A bear is getting upset when it:

- clacks its teeth;
- makes an explosive blowing sound.

A bear is telling you to move away when it:

- blows loudly;
- makes short lunges, and slaps the ground or an object;
- makes “bluff” charges that stop short of you.



USFWS

Bear spray

Pressurized bear spray (or pepper spray) can ward off aggressive bears at close range. The spray irritates their eyes and nostrils, but causes no injury. Check local regulations and read the entire label before taking bear spray into the wilderness, and follow the manufacturer’s directions. Test-fire the canister at least once, but be careful not to spray into the wind. Remember, bear spray is *not* a substitute for other precautions: *always avoid a bear encounter if possible.*

Black bears are:

- **intelligent animals with excellent long-term memories;**
- **omnivores that eat a wide variety of foods;**
- **inhabitants of most of Ontario’s wilderness.**

What to do if you meet a bear

In the backcountry

- Leave the area.
- Back away slowly: stay calm and don’t run.
- Make yourself look large; if you’re in a group, band together and raise your arms.
- Try to scare the bear by waving, yelling, banging pots, blowing air horns or making other loud noises.
- If a bear follows you, put your pack down to distract it while you retreat.

At a campground, cottage or rural home

- Take shelter in a building or vehicle.
- Try to scare the animal with loud noise (campground bears can be more difficult to scare than backcountry bears, however).
- Ensure that the bear has a clear escape route: don’t scare it into a neighbouring campsite.



Steve Pfiffer, Coldwell Banker, www.forestryimages.org

The extremely rare cases of bear attacks on humans

In North America between 1907 and 1993, 37 human deaths were attributed to black bears. Bears that attack and kill humans are thought to be very different than those that frequent campsites or garbage dumps. It is not believed that nuisance campsite bears learn to recognize humans as food. The so-called “predacious bear” has usually never been in contact with humans. The thought that some bears deliberately prey on humans is disturbing. However, the chances of being killed by a black bear are still extremely low.



Bureau of Land Management/photo by Frank Lang

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On the remote chance of black bear attack

- Do not play dead. Playing dead may deter grizzly bears, but will not work with black bears.
- Do not climb up a tree. Black bears are adept climbers and you will only trap yourself.
- Fight back. You can improve your chances of escape by launching a strong counter-attack.
- Fend off the bear any way you can.



Preventing bear problems

In the backcountry

- Avoid camping near bear signs (e.g. tracks, scat, trees with claw marks, or ripped-apart stumps), feeding areas, or sites with food or garbage left by previous campers.
- Avoid using perfumes, scented soap and toiletries.
- Cook downwind of, and at least 100 metres away from, your tent. Keep your campsite clean and burn all food scraps.
- Master the art of hanging food packs. Tie a long strong cord between two trees, at least 4 m from the ground. The trees should be at least 6 metres apart and as far away as possible from other trees. Place items in sealed plastic containers and place the containers in a bag. Hang the bag from the cord, ideally about 3 metres from the nearest tree. Hang pans from the food bag to create noise and scare off curious bears.
- Keep dogs at home or on a leash: a loose dog may antagonize a bear or run back to you with the bear on its tail!

At a campground, cottage or rural home

- Put all garbage in tightly sealed metal containers or bear-proof garbage cans.
- Take refuse to the dump frequently.
- Store all food, utensils and even clothes with food smells in the trunk of your car or inside buildings.
- Remove food sources such as bird feeders and open compost piles from properties.
- Clean and store away barbecues.
- Keep your dog tied up to avoid confrontation.

You can help prevent problem bears

Problem bears are usually created by humans. When we are careless, we teach bears that people are easy sources of food. Poorly managed open-pit dumps, for example, are notorious training grounds for problem bears. And at home, garbage bins, dirty barbecue grills and pet food left outdoors are just some of the most

common bear attractants. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, local municipalities or private companies may trap and remove threatening animals, but bears have good memories and excellent homing abilities.

Ontario Nature protects and restores nature through research, education and conservation action. Ontario Nature champions woodlands, wetlands and wildlife, and preserves essential habitat through its own system of nature reserves. It is a charitable organization representing 25,000 members and over 135 member groups across the province, connecting individuals and communities to nature.

If you wish to support Ontario Nature or learn more about current conservation issues in Ontario visit: www.ontarionature.org



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