

What Should I Do if I See a Bear?

Seeing a bear in the wild is a special treat for any visitor to a national park. While it is an exciting moment, it is important to remember that bears in national parks are wild and can be dangerous. Their behavior is sometimes unpredictable. Although rare, attacks on humans have occurred, inflicting serious injuries and death. Each bear and each experience is unique; there is no single strategy that will work in all situations and that guarantees safety. Most bear encounters end without injury. Following some basic guidelines may help to lessen the threat of danger. Your safety can depend on your ability to calm the bear.

When you arrive in a park, always remember to check with the nearest visitor center or backcountry office for the latest bear safety information.

Following [viewing etiquette](#) is the first step to avoiding an encounter with a bear that could escalate into an attack. Keeping your distance and not surprising bears are some of the most important things you can do. Most bears will avoid humans if they hear them coming. Pay attention to your surroundings and make a special effort to be noticeable if you are in an area with known bear activity or a good food source, such as berry bushes.

Bear Encounters

Once a bear has noticed you and is paying attention to you, additional strategies can help prevent the situation from escalating.

- **Identify yourself** by talking calmly so the bear knows you are a human and not a prey animal. Remain still; stand your ground but slowly wave your arms. Help the bear recognize you as a human. 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.
- **Stay calm** and remember that most bears do not want to attack you; they usually just want to be left alone. Bears may bluff their way out of an encounter by charging and then turning away at the last second. Bears may also react defensively by woofing, yawning, salivating, growling, snapping their jaws, and laying their ears back. Continue to talk to the bear in low tones; this will help you stay calmer, and it won't be threatening to the bear. A scream or sudden movement may trigger an attack. Never imitate bear sounds or make a high-pitched squeal.
- **Pick up small children** immediately.
- **Hike and travel in groups.** Groups of people are usually noisier and smellier than a single person. Therefore, bears often become aware of groups of people at greater distances, and because of their cumulative size, groups are also intimidating to bears.
- **Make yourselves look as large as possible** (for example, move to higher ground).
- **Do NOT allow the bear access to your food.** Getting your food will only encourage the bear and make the problem worse for others.
- **Do NOT drop your pack** as it can provide protection for your back and prevent a bear from accessing your food.
- If the bear is stationary, **move away slowly and sideways**; this allows you to keep an eye on the bear and avoid tripping. Moving sideways is also non-threatening to bears. Do NOT run, but if the bear follows, stop and hold your ground. Bears can run as fast as a racehorse both uphill and down. Like dogs, they will chase fleeing animals. Do NOT climb a tree. Both grizzlies and black bears can climb trees.
- **Leave** the area or take a detour. If this is impossible, wait until the bear moves away. Always leave the bear an escape route.
- **Be especially cautious if you see a female with cubs**; never place yourself between a mother and her cub, and never attempt to approach them. The chances of an attack escalate greatly if she perceives you as a danger to her cubs.

Bear Attacks

Bear attacks are rare; most bears are only interested in protecting food, cubs, or their space. However, being mentally prepared can help you have the most effective reaction. Every situation is different, but below are guidelines on how brown bear attacks can differ from black bear attacks. Help protect others by reporting all bear incidents to a park ranger immediately. Above all, keep your distance from bears!

- **Brown/Grizzly Bears:** If you are attacked by a brown/grizzly bear, leave your pack on and **PLAY DEAD**. Lay flat on your stomach with your hands clasped behind your neck. Spread your legs to make it harder for the bear to turn you over. Remain still until the bear leaves the area. Fighting back usually increases the intensity of such attacks. However, if the attack persists, fight back vigorously. Use whatever you have at hand to hit the bear in the face.
- **Black Bears:** If you are attacked by a black bear, **DO NOT PLAY DEAD**. Try to escape to a secure place such as a car or building. If escape is not possible, try to fight back using any object available. Concentrate your kicks and blows on the bear's face and muzzle.

If any bear attacks you in your tent, or stalks you and then attacks, do NOT play dead—fight back! This kind of attack is very rare, but can be serious because it often means the bear is looking for food and sees you as prey.

Bear Pepper Spray

Bear pepper spray can be an important thing to carry when exploring the back country. It is used defensively to stop an aggressive, charging, or attacking bear. Although it's used in the same manner you would use mace on an attacking person, bear pepper spray and human pepper spray are not the same. Make sure you select an EPA approved product that is specifically designed to stop aggressive bears. It is not a repellent so do not apply to your body or equipment. Check with your national park to see if bear pepper spray is recommended or allowed for the activities you have planned. Learn more about selecting and using bear pepper spray in this [introductory video](#) or by visiting the [Using Spray to Deter an Aggressive Bear](#) page on Yellowstone's website.

