

BEAR SAFETY





WHAT IS BEAR SAFETY?

The Mount Sutton Range and nearby highly productive lower elevation habitats of the Ruitter Valley and surrounding watersheds are "home" to black bears. We live here too. "Bear Safety" addresses the extremely rare but real dangers, which bears can sometimes cause. Most appropriately, however, this article will review the multitudinous hazards we pose to bears! *Black bears are our neighbours.* We are privileged to share our rural environment with these remarkable wild creatures. "Bear Safety" is about responsibility - responsibility, which we alone must understand and execute in our daily lives so that both bears and people may enjoy peace, prosperity and long, lives.

THE BLACK BEAR

"*Ursus Americanus*" embodies the most treasured qualities of the remote natural habitats we admire and love. The bear is powerful - yet gentle, magnificent and inviting yet fundamentally wild. When a bear loses its natural self-reliance and becomes "human food habituated" its wildness is diminished, and its ever-frequent excursions into human dominated habitats eventually result in its death.

Throughout our region, the black bear is our largest carnivore, though over 90% of its diet is derived from plants, including grasses, sedges, forbs, roots, bulbs, flowers, buds, catkins, leaves, berries, nuts and sometimes the cambium layer of tree bark. Shrinking natural habitats, increasing numbers of roads, traffic, recreational and residential uses of open spaces result in an increase in human/bear encounters. Occasional mast failures (berries and nuts) exacerbate the problem as hungry bears are forced to seek food in our villages, farms and suburban neighbourhoods. Our careless handling of garbage, birdfeeders, and pet and livestock foods is the number one cause of bear/human encounters. While a tiny percentage of these encounters result in human injury or death, bear forays into human habitat almost always are fatal to the bear!





BEAR ATTACKS

Most injuries from bear attacks are minor and are largely precipitated by people's carelessness with food. Some "attacks" aren't really attacks at all. These attacks are occasionally elicited by our inappropriate reactions when confronted by a defensive bear. Researchers throughout North America have marvelled at how tolerant and non-aggressive black bears actually are, including females with their young. Contrary

to popular myth, bears exercise amazing restraint and prefer to avoid physical conflicts. Even so-called "charging" bears are most often not the dreaded menace people believe them to be. Such charges - full of aggressive looking ground slamming paw swats, loud teeth and jaw popping sounds, snorts and forceful blowing noises are a bear's effective display of body language communicating its desire to "bluff" and intimidate you, and avoid, not engage in, physical conflict. The best thing we can do is to STOP, REMAIN CALM (as hard as that sounds!), and NOT REACT DEFENSIVELY, lest our behaviour cause the bear to follow through with a full aggressive attack. The bear is simply demanding more space.

When confronted by a bear, DO NOT RUN! In the words of Colorado bear researcher Tom Beck, "People who run from a bear can expect two things. One, the bear will chase them, and two, the bear will catch them."

If a bear is quietly studying you and not showing interest in your food, be alert to the possibility of a predacious attack. Try to slowly increase your distance from the bear. Move to higher terrain (without running!). Arm yourself with whatever is at hand and prepare to intimidate the bear or at worst physically defend yourself. Shout loudly, stand your ground, brandish a big stick, throw rocks and do whatever you can to frighten the bear. In the extremely rare event that you are physically attacked, fight back! Such defensive actions, however seemingly puny, have successfully repelled predatory attacks.

THREATS WE POSE TO BEARS

We inflict far more harm to bears and all wildlife than the other way around. You stand a ninety thousand times greater likelihood of being a victim of a homicide than being killed by a bear! Tens of thousands of bears are killed each year in North America to legal hunting alone. While each Province and State may legitimately manage the well being of its bear population using sport hunting as a management tool, other human-caused mortalities are incalculable and increasingly worrisome.

At the top of the food pyramid, black bears and other large and wide-ranging carnivore populations are vulnerable to numerous human-caused mortality risks. We compete for space and resources. Habitat loss, poaching and road kill mortalities increase, along with the number of bear/human interactions - resulting in still more bear casualties. For small populations of bears such losses are deadly. Populations cannot be maintained over time and our bear neighbours disappear altogether.

WHAT DO BEARS NEED

Wild bears need their wild habitats! Including wilderness areas, recreational parks, industrial forests, private woodlands and farm edge habitats, black bears thrive in a mosaic of landscapes, enjoying the food and cover opportunities they provide. Bottom line- bears require a diversity of upland and lowland habitats, portions of which must remain remote and relatively inaccessible to people. Dense under story vegetation and an abundance and variety of food-producing trees, shrubs and wetland habitats are of paramount importance to Sutton Mountain bears. Habitat losses due to our residential, recreational and thoughtless resource extraction pressures results in reduced opportunities for bears to feed themselves raise their families and maintain healthy populations over time. We can help bears by supporting local and regional research, conservation planning and land protection efforts aimed at protecting necessary habitat cores and corridors for bears and numerous other plant and animal species. Successful conservation initiatives now are vital to the functioning integrity of whole ecosystems, as well as to the long-term well being and sustainability of wild bears and human rural communities alike.



WAYS TO MINIMIZE BEAR ENCOUNTERS

At home and in the wild your dedication to the following guidelines will dramatically reduce risks to you, your property and *your neighbours the bears*.

AT HOME:

- Never bait or deliberately feed bears, or leave unattended food, garbage, pet or livestock food outside.
- Secure all garbage and trash in animal - resistant containers.
- Feeding birds between April 1st and November 30th provides a regular and abundant quantity of rich food, which bears relish and will find hard to resist. Do not feed during this time. Birds are quite capable of foraging for natural foods during these months. Bears love sunflower seeds and suet and will discover and exploit this easy and delectable food source - resulting in a potentially hazardous situation.
- Use electric fence to deter opportunistic bears from accessing beehives, vegetable gardens, home orchards and compost piles.
- Keep barbecue grills and outdoor picnic areas clean and food free while not in use.



IN THE BACKCOUNTRY:

- Never cook or store food in or near your tent! Lingering food odours may entice a bear to discover what's inside!
- Hang all food at least 10 to 15 feet off the ground, using a sturdy tree limb. Place your food bag at least 6 feet from the trunk of the tree you are using. A preferred alternative would be to use bear proof food poles, lockers, cable systems or canisters which many Provincial and U.S. Park agencies provide for your safety.
- Do not attempt to burn garbage or trash in camp. It is often not completely burned and the residue will be sought after by bears after you've departed, resulting in a potentially dangerous situation for bears and future campers alike.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Herrero, Stephen. *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, The Lyons Press, Guilford, Conn. 1985, 2002.

"Staying Safe in Bear Country", and "Working in Bear Country" (two videos) distributed by Magic Lantern Communications Ltd. Ontario, Canada. 1-800-2631717.

