

Recommendations for Human – Black Bear Encounters

Developed by the Northeast Black Bear Technical Committee

Black bears are large, strong wild animals that should be treated with respect. Seeing a black bear can be an exciting, and for some people, a nerve wracking event. Bears should always be appreciated from a distance to ensure the safety of humans and bears. These recommendations are meant to be general and cover the basic types of human-bear interactions that can occur. Encounters vary greatly, and all situations are different. Aggressive and predatory behaviors by bear are very rare, but possible, so it is wise to be aware of the bear's behavioral signals and appropriate actions to take. *These recommendations are specific to North American black bears. If you live or recreate in an area where other bear species may be encountered, you should familiarize yourself with how to react in those situations, too.*

In general, when you encounter a black bear you should:

- Remain calm. **DON'T** run from a bear. **DON'T** climb trees to escape a bear.
- Ensure the bear has an escape route.
- Back away when possible.
- If attacked, immediately fight back.
- **DON'T** feed bears.

A word about bear spray: Bear spray (pepper spray specifically made as a bear deterrent) can be an effective tool if you encounter an aggressive bear. In order for bear spray to be effective, you must be trained and practiced in its safe use. Be aware of local laws and regulations that may restrict the carrying or use of bear spray.

I. If you encounter a bear while in a natural setting:

A. The bear is unaware of your presence:

Your Action:

- Quietly back away from the bear and leave the area.
- DO NOT approach the bear.

B. The bear is aware of your presence and:

1. The bear is uninterested:

Your Action:

- Quietly back away from the bear and leave the area.
- DO NOT approach the bear.

2. The bear is curious:

Bear Behavior:

- The bear continues to look in your direction, smells the air, or slowly approaches.

Your Action:

- Talk in a calm voice while slowly backing away from the bear.
- DO NOT approach the bear.

3. The bear is nervous or feels threatened by your presence:

Bear Behavior:

- The bear retreats up a tree.
- The bear lowers its head with ears flattened, and sways back and forth.

- The bear makes vocalizations which can include huffing and jaw popping and/or swats at the ground or tree.
- These are common behaviors, and do not indicate the bear will attack – you have simply gotten too close.

Your Action:

- Begin repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice.
- Back away and leave the area.

4. The bear becomes aggressive:

Bear Behavior:

- The bear approaches you.
- The bear begins to follow you.
- The bear charges.

Your Action:

- Make yourself look bigger by putting your arms above your head. Continue to repeat "Hey bear" in a calm voice. Back away and leave the area while monitoring the bear.
- If it continues to follow you, stand your ground, make yourself look bigger, shout at the bear, threaten the bear with whatever is at hand (bang a stick on the ground, clap your hands), and prepare to use bear pepper spray if it is available. If the bear stops or turns around, back away and leave the area.
- If charged, stand your ground, talk to the bear in a calm voice and use bear pepper spray when available. If the bear makes contact with you, fight back using anything you have (e.g. stick, binoculars, swinging a backpack, kicking, etc.)!

5. The bear is stalking you (predatory behavior):

Bear Behavior:

- The bear follows you as you move away
- The bear is making little noise while following you
- The bear may attempt to stay out of your sight, but continue to follow you
- The bear intently stares at you

Your Action:

- Follow the actions outlined in #4.

II. You encounter a bear in your backyard:

Encountering a bear in a backyard is a common occurrence in some areas because bears are often attracted to bird feeders, trash, pet food, etc.

Your Action:

- Back away slowly while repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice.
- From a safe distance, make loud noises (for example shouting or banging pots and pans) to deter the bear from the area.
- Do not approach the bear.
- After the bear leaves, be sure to keep trash in a tight container or locked out building, bring in bird feeders and pet food and remove any other potential attractants.

III. You encounter a bear in a building, in a dumpster, around a corner, in your home, etc.:

Your Action:

- Back away slowly while repeating "Hey bear" in a calm voice.

- Give the bear a clear escape route and do not corner it. If in your house or an outbuilding, do not lock the bear in a room. Instead, leave doors open as you exit the building.
- Do not approach the bear or try to force the bear out of a room.
- Contact 911 for assistance if necessary.

IV. Your dog is attacked by a bear:

Your Action:

- **DO NOT** rush to the bear and attempt to separate the bear and dog.
- Make loud noises such as shouting and clapping.
- If available, spray the bear with a hose or throw objects at the bear while remaining at a safe distance.
- Once the bear retreats, retrieve your dog, back away and leave the area.
- Contact your local veterinarian or health department to be advised on rabies protocol.
- Bear-dog conflicts can be reduced by checking your yard or porch for bears before letting your dog outside, especially at night, and keeping dogs leashed and supervised when walking in areas frequented by bears.

If you have questions about these recommendations, please contact your local Wildlife Authorities.