Visiting Bear Habitat

- Keep a close watch on children, and teach them what to do if they encounter a bear.
- While hiking, make noise to avoid a surprise encounter with a bear.
- Never keep food in your tent.
- Store food and toiletries in bear-proof containers or in an airtight container in the trunk of your vehicle.
- Keep a clean camp by cleaning up and storing food and garbage immediately after meals.
- Use bear-proof garbage cans whenever possible or store your garbage in a secure location with your food.

Black Bear Distribution

= Black Bear Range

California is home to an estimated 16,000-24,000 blacks bears. They occupy forests and wooded mountains, and eat a wide variety of foods.

DFG map

If You Encounter a Bear

Never approach a bear. Give it plenty of room to pass by. Most black bears try to avoid confrontation when given a chance.

Do not run from a bear. Running away from a black bear may stimulate its instinct to chase. You cannot outrun a bear. Instead, stand and face the animal. Make eye contact without staring. If you have small children with you, pick them up so that they do not run or panic. Give the bear room so that it can avoid you.

If you encounter a bear cub, do not pick it up! You run the risk of being attacked by a protective mother bear. If you think the cub is abandoned, contact the Department of Fish and Game. Orphaned cubs can be captured, rehabilitated and released, but only by organizations with specific authorization. People who pick up cubs without authorization may be cited.

People have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat they are sharing.

If a Black Bear Approaches

Try to demonstrate to the bear that you may be a danger to it. Make yourself appear larger, stand up, raise your arms and open your jacket. Yell at the bear, bang pots and pans or whatever objects you may have with you, and create a general commotion.

If a Black Bear Attacks

Black bear behavior is quite variable. Research indicates that bear attacks have been avoided or injuries reduced when the victims fought back using any means available. Throwing rocks and striking the bear with branches or camping equipment have been shown to be effective.

Reporting a Problem

If a bear behaves aggressively or attacks people, contact the California Department of Fish and Game during regular business hours: Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. If the encounter or attack occurs after business hours, call the California Department of Fish and Game's 24-hour dispatch at (916) 445-0045. The Department will assess the threat to public safety and take appropriate action.

Photo by Bob Kinney

California Department of Fish & Game Offices

Northern California-North Coast Region
(530) 225-2300

Sacramento Valley-Central Sierra Region
(916) 358-2900

Central Coast Region
(707) 944-5500

San Joaquin Valley-Southern Sierra Region
(559) 243-4005

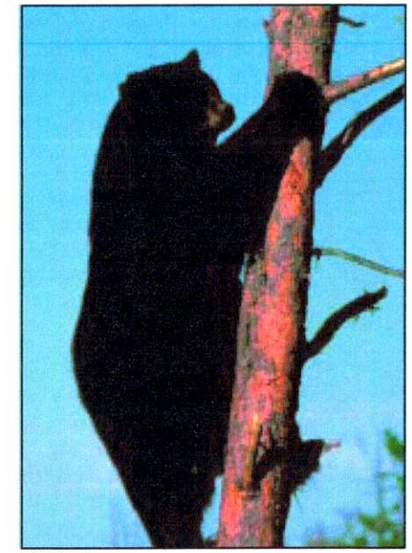
South Coast Region
(858) 467-4201

Eastern Sierra-Inland Deserts Region
(562) 590-5132

Bishop Office
(760) 872-1171

Eureka Office
(707) 445-6493

Living With California Black Bears



File photo

California Department of Fish & Game
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, California 95814

Bear Facts

California has a large population of black bears (*ursus americanus*), estimated at 16,000 to 24,000 animals. Black bears range in color from black to cinnamon, often with a white blaze on the chest. Males are much larger than females. On average, a black bear is about 3-1/2 feet tall (standing on all four feet) and weighs about 200 pounds, but some males can weigh over 500 pounds. Black bears are strong swimmers and tree climbers. Although they have a clumsy walk, they are surprisingly fast sprinters, reaching speeds of up to 30 miles per hour.

In the wild, black bears occupy forests and wooded mountains. They are omnivorous, meaning they eat both meat and vegetation. They eat whatever is available, depending on the season. A typical diet consists of berries, plants, nuts, roots, fruit, honey, honeycombs, bees, insects, and larvae. Bears also catch and eat fish and small mammals, and will eat carrion (dead animals).

Female bears mate beginning at four years of age, and produce cubs every other year. The cubs remain with their mother for 18-20 months, learning to forage and hunt.

As winter approaches, bears will forage up to 20 hours a day, storing enough fat to sustain them through hibernation. They seek out a suitable den, such as a hollow tree-sometimes 40 to 60 feet above the ground-and line it with leaves or pine needles. Females with yearling cubs will hibernate with their cubs. Bears remain in their dens, without eating, until spring. They will often return to the same den to hibernate year after year. Large trees are very important to bears.

A Fed Bear is a Dead Bear

In the spring, bears emerge from their dens with one thing in mind: eating. They travel for miles in search of food, guided by a keen sense of smell. A full garbage can or a messy campsite might seem like the Motherlode to a hungry bear, and that's when most bear/human conflicts begin.

The California black bear, in addition to being a strong swimmer, sprinter, and climber, is very intelligent. One easy meal from a house, car or campsite is all it takes for some bears to learn that people and food go together. Once a bear makes this association, it's not a pleasant story for people or bears.

The best way to avoid conflict with bears is to prevent it.

One hungry bear is capable of causing thousands of dollars worth of property damage in a single incident. By law, a homeowner who has taken steps to eliminate bear attractants but still suffers property damage can obtain a permit from the California Department of Fish and Game to kill the bear causing the problem.

Bears that are accustomed to people can become bold and even aggressive. There are dozens of documented cases of people being mauled, and even killed, by black bears. Although rare, when a bear behaves aggressively towards people, the Department of Fish and Game may need to euthanize the animal in the interest of public safety.

DFG File photo

What About Relocation?

Over the years, wildlife agencies around the country have tried to solve bear/human conflicts by capturing and moving "problem bears" to other locations. Almost without exception, the relocated bear suffers one of three fates: 1) it returns to the place where it was captured (and resumes its problem behaviors); 2) it remains in its new location, continuing the problem behaviors; or 3) it dies in its new location as a result of conflicts with other bears.

DFG File photo

What About "Bear Education"?

A researcher in Alaska tried an experiment to determine if bears that routinely raided local garbage cans could "unlearn" their behavior. He randomly placed pellets, laced with a chemical, in the garbage cans. When eaten, the pellets would cause the bears to vomit violently. These intelligent animals quickly learned that the garbage was fine, as long as they avoided the pellets.

Shooting bears with rubber bullets or pepper spray may temporarily scare them away, but it hasn't been successful in changing a bear's behavior if the bear has learned that food is available. At best, it is a short-term, temporary solution in areas that already have problem bears. As long as there is food available, the bears return after the bullets and pepper spray are put away. These tactics are legal for use only by law enforcement personnel and employees of some public agencies.

Prevention Is The Key

People who live in, or visit, bear habitat have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat they are sharing. Feeding bears, whether intentional or not, can amount to a death sentence for the animal. More and more communities and campgrounds are adopting a zero-tolerance policy toward people who feed bears and other wildlife. In some places, people are being cited for failing to properly store food and garbage.

Living in Bear Habitat

Bears are attracted to anything smelly or edible, especially garbage. Bears are also attracted to bee hives, orchards and gardens. Occasionally, livestock are killed and eaten. Follow these guidelines to help keep your home "bearproof":

- Deodorize garbage cans with bleach or ammonia.
- Double-bag garbage to help eliminate odors.
- Separate "wet garbage" and keep it in an air and odor tight container. Use a garbage disposal whenever possible. Freeze meat bones or other smelly items until pick-up day.
- Be sure to keep barbecue grills clean.
- Pick up fallen tree fruit, and put away pet food and bird feeders at night.
- Close windows at night on accessible ground floors and decks.
- Don't leave food in or near a window sill or on a counter near an open window.
- Securely block access to potential hibernation sites, such as crawl spaces under decks or buildings.
- Install bear-proof garbage and compost containers.
- Request a bear-proof garbage bin for your neighborhood or apartment complex.