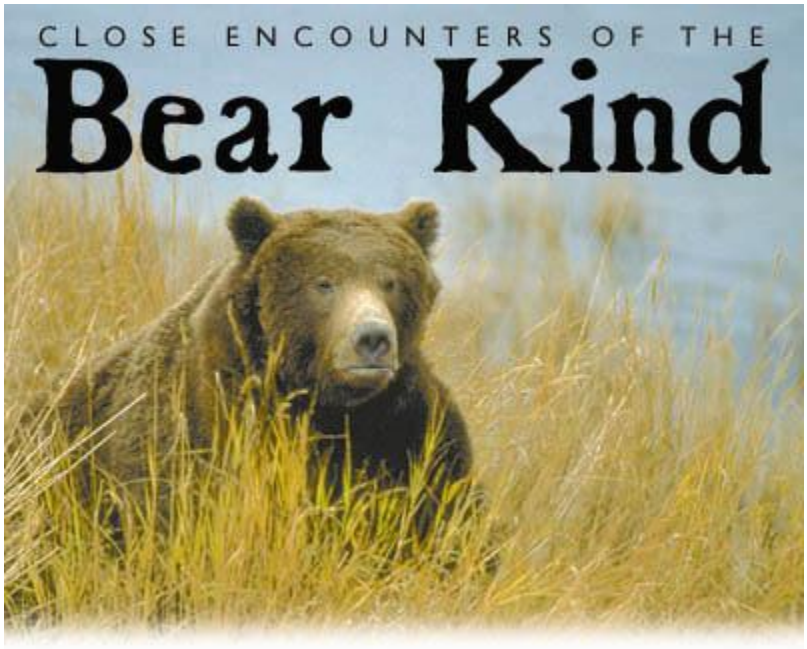


The primary objective of this article is to better acquaint people with bears, their life history, their behavior and how humans fit into their lives. This information will help you make more rational decisions while you are in bear country and/or when you encounter a bear. Hopefully, you will then be in a better position to have a positive interaction with a bear, rather than being faced with a threatening situation.

Since childhood we have been inundated with mixed signals about bears. On one hand we are thrilled and terrified with stories of bears mauling and eating people for no reason. These fears are reinforced by our natural fear of something that is bigger and more powerful than we are. Yet, on the other hand, we see trained bears in circuses and watch television programs in which bears are cute, cuddly and kind. These bear images are reinforced by the stuffed "teddy bears" that offer companionship and security to millions of children. Unfortunately, neither of these extreme images we have about bears accurately portray the truth about bears in their natural environment.



Anytime we travel off the beaten path we have a responsibility to both the bears and to ourselves to behave in a knowledgeable and responsible manner. The more we understand about bears, the less we will fear the unknown. Hopefully, this article will allow the reader to make rational decisions about how to avoid bear encounters and how to handle it if we do come fact-to-face with them. However, it cannot be stressed enough, and I'll repeat it several times in this article, bears as individuals are very similar to humans, as well as other life on earth. Each and every bear on our planet has its own individual behavior. We can make generalizations about bear behavior and most bears will follow genetic behavioral patterns. However, as individuals, you may follow every guideline on how to behave when in a bear encounter, and still may be attacked. No one can predict a bear's behavior with 100% certainty.

Bear Identification
Three species of bears live in the United States: the black bear; the brown/grizzly bear; and the polar bear. Because each of these species has a different lifestyle, and somewhat different behavior patterns, it is important to recognize what type of bear you are dealing with. Since the likelihood of encountering a polar bear is fairly slim for most of us, we will mainly deal with black bears and brown/grizzly bears here.

Black Bear
Black bears are the smallest, and most abundant of the bear species in the USA. They are about 5 - 6 feet long and stand 2 - 3 feet high at the shoulders. They range from 200 to 500 pounds. While they are most commonly black, other color phases include brown (cinnamon) and rarely gray (blue) and white. Muzzles are almost always brown. Black bears can be distinguished from brown bears by: 1) their head shape (a black bears nose is straight in profile, a brown bear is dished); 2) their claws (black bears are curved and smaller, brown bears are relatively straight and larger); 3) body shape (when standing, a black bears rump seems to be higher than it's shoulders; a brown bears shoulders are usually higher than it's rump); and, 4) by their ears (a black bears ears are more prominent than a brown bears ears).

Brown/Grizzly Bear
Brown and grizzly bears are the same species. They can be over 8 feet long and stand 5 feet tall at the shoulder. Weights are typically 600-800 pounds but can reach 1500 pounds in parts of Alaska. Colors range from blonde to dark brown. A brown bear's muzzle is the same color as its body. Cubs frequently have a white collar around their neck and shoulders. The "dish face" and "large shoulder hump" are distinguishing features of the brown bear.



Bear Life History
Although bears are frequently creatures of habit, they are also intelligent and each has its unique personality. The way a bear reacts is often dictated by its mother, the experiences it has had on its own and of course, the instincts that nature provided. So, again, like other intelligent animals, such as dogs, we can make general statements about bears but few people can accurately predict their behavior. The most important sense organ for a bear is its nose. They have an incredible sense of smell, and they seem to trust their nose more than any other sense. Hearing and sight are also important, but to a lesser degree. A bear's hearing is probably better than ours, but not as keen as dogs. Their sight is probably comparable to that of a human.
Both black and brown bears have similar life styles, although they do not usually get along with each other (brown bears will kill and eat black bears). Where both species occur in the same area, black bears tend to favor forested habitats while brown bears favor more open areas.

Bears are opportunists, relying on their intelligence and their senses to find food. They use differing habitats throughout the year, depending on the availability of food and other necessities of life. The amount of area a bear covers in a given year is partially dependent on how far it has

to go to satisfy these basic needs. In some areas, individuals bears may have a home range of less than a square mile. In other areas, home range can encompass hundreds of square miles. Males usually range over larger areas than do females.

In the spring, black and brown bears come out of their dens. Males are usually the first bears to emerge, and females with new cubs the last. When bears emerge from their dens, they are lethargic for the first few days, frequently sleeping near their dens and not eating. When they do start eating, they seek carrion (dead moose, deer, etc.), roots and emerging vegetation.

In the early summer, bears continue to eat new grass and ferns as they develop. Moose calves, deer fawns and the like are also important foods where they are available, as well as smaller critters such as ground squirrels. In areas where they are available, fish, particularly salmon, are the most important food for bears from June through September. Other summer foods for bears include berries and a wide variety of vegetation. Being omnivores and opportunists bears will eat almost anything edible, and even kill the occasional adult deer, moose and the like. When bears kill or scavenge they commonly cover the portions they cannot eat with sticks, leaves, and duff. A bear will remain near a food cache for days and will defend it from all intruders.

During the late summer and early fall, bears consume tremendous quantities of succulent fruits. As the season progresses toward winter, a bear's diet becomes more varied. The last remaining berries and fish are sought, as are live and hunter killed deer, moose, elk, and caribou. This is the time that bears are trying to put on the final deposits of fat before their long winter naps.



In late fall and early winter bears move into their denning areas and begin preparing a suitable den. Black bears usually den in holes excavated under large trees or rock outcrops, or a small natural cavities. Brown bears tend to dig their dens in steep alpine areas. Dens are just large enough for bears to squeeze into. Bears rarely eat, drink, urinate or defecate while they are denning. They sleep deeply, but do not truly hibernate, and they can be awakened by loud noises or disturbances.

Cubs are born in the den, usually around January. Black bear cubs usually stay with their mothers for a year and a half, and brown bear cubs stay with mom for 2.5 to 3.5 years. Black bears are sexually mature at age 2 and brown bears at age 4 - 8. Mating season is in the spring and both species are polygamous (multiple mates). Both brown and black bears can live for 25 - 30 years, although most live less than 20 years.

Bear/Human Interaction

Given the choice, most bears would prefer to be left alone to pursue the finer things in life, like food and the opposite sex, but they share their homes with other creatures, such as humans. We intrude on virtually every aspect of a bear's life. There are cabins, camps, airplanes, boats, cars, fishermen, hunters, hikers and field workers. Bears are normally pretty tolerant of these activities and if they can find a secure way to avoid them, they will.

We can help bears make a graceful retreat, and avoid many close encounters by letting bears know we are around. Walking in groups, talking and wearing noise making devices, such as bear bells all serve to warn a bear of your approach (I personally dislike "bear bells" as an intrusion on my wilderness experience; and in many areas, like Yellowstone, they are jokingly referred to as "dinner bells").

Whenever possible, avoid hiking and camping in areas where bears are common, such as bear trails through heavy brush or along salmon streams in the west. Keep an eye out for bears and bear sign. If you happen upon a dead animal, especially one that is covered with sticks and duff (a bear cache) immediately retreat (but don't run) the way you came and make a detour around the area. If you see a cub up a tree or a small bear walking by itself, again, retreat and detour the area. Like all young animals cubs wander away from their mothers, but female bears are furiously protective when they believe their cubs are threatened.

Even if we do everything we can to avoid meeting a bear, sometimes bears come to us. Bears, like many creatures, are curious. In most cases, a curious bear will investigate "human sign," perhaps test it out (chew on a raft, bite into beer cans), and leave, never to return. However, if the bear was rewarded during his investigation by finding something to eat, it could be a different story. Like dogs, it is easy for a bear to find food or garbage and keep coming back for it, but it is hard to stop them from doing it once they have been rewarded.

That is why it is important to keep human food and garbage away from bears. When in bear country, always think about the way you store, cook and dispose of your food. Never feed bears. Food should be stored in air tight containers, away from living and sleeping areas. Garbage should be burned, stored in air tight containers or packed out. Fish and game should be cleaned well away from camp, and clothing that smells of fish, game or food should be stored away from sleeping areas. Menstruating women should take extra precautions to keep themselves as clean as possible and soiled tampons or pads should be treated as another form of organic garbage.

Once a bear has obtained food from people, it may continue to frequent areas occupied by people. If a bear doesn't find any more food or garbage after the next few tries, it may give up and move back into a more natural feeding pattern. However, some bears may become bold enough to raid campsites and break into cabins in their search for human food. Often these bears are then destroyed.