



## Manitoba Association of Cottage Owners Inc.

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Bear Smart Brochure 2005

### **BE BEAR SMART AND ENJOY BEAR COUNTRY...**

**It is the responsibility of everyone to familiarize themselves with bears and bear behaviour if they live or enter bear country.**

**Before people head out, they should stop at their local resources field office to pick-up 2 brochures, “*BLACK BEAR ENCOUNTERS - What To Do*” and “*Removing the Attractant, Removes the Bear,*” or look on the government’s web-site under;**

[http://www.gov.mb.ca/natres/wildlife/problem\\_wildlife/black\\_bear.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/natres/wildlife/problem_wildlife/black_bear.html)

Part 1: Bear Biology

Part 2: If you are in Bear Country – practice “Good Housekeeping” principles

Part 3: What to do if you encounter a bear.

Much of a bear’s behaviour is governed by its search for food. Bears travel extensively and spend most of their time foraging to support growth, offspring and to prepare for spending the winter in dens, a time when all their energy and water comes from stored fat. Black bears are naturally inquisitive and normally timid, but they can also be aggressive.

Typically, adult males are the first to emerge from their dens in mid-to-late April, followed by sub-adult males and females, solitary females and females accompanied by yearlings, and finally, females with cubs of the year. Sub-adult males tend to disperse farther-and-wider looking to establish home ranges often being forced into less preferred habitat by older, more dominant bears. Bears continue to lose weight in the spring and are in their poorest condition in late June.

Emerging bears tend to feed in openings in the forest, and along waterways and road edges where new growth first appears. Since their digestive system cannot digest the tougher cellulose portions of plants, black bears select for the tender, succulent parts of plants. Foods with higher digestibility would therefore include catkins, clover, dandelions, ferns, flushing aspen leaves, grasses, insects, sedges, and carrion. They may seek food in streams and feed on spawning fish and they are known to chase down and consume moose/elk calves and deer fawns when they are first born and still vulnerable. As the season progresses, their diet expands to include insect larvae and fruits (blueberries, blackberries, various currants, dogwoods, pin & choke cherries, raspberries, various sarsaparilla, strawberries) and then extends further to include acorns, mountain ash berries, and nuts. They have been known to feed on beaver, snowshoe hare, and ground squirrels. Bears whose range includes agricultural land will

consume crops (especially corn, oats, wheat) in late summer, occasionally beehives and livestock. Bears double their weight between early July and late September, adult males averaging 1.5 kg/day (3.3 lbs/day), adult females 0.9 kg/day (2 lbs/day).

When natural foods are in short supply or when immature bears are dispersing, bears are forced to travel beyond their established or maternal home ranges. This may place them into contact with humans. Non-natural foods, such as garbage and birdfeed, become attractive to bears because they are high quality foods that require little effort to acquire. Since bears are opportunistic foragers, they quickly learn to associate human activity with something to eat, and may select for it because of its availability and predictability. To a bear, the reward of access to these foods outweighs any associated risks.

People must accept ownership for the role they play in causing problems with bears. The solution to reducing conflict is to stop the cycle of habituation and conditioning by people. By taking simple steps to eliminate and/or secure attractants, we can safely coexist in bear country. When in bear country, one should always assume bears are around, even if no recent problems have occurred.

Campers should keep their campsite clean; store their food in their vehicle; and make daily trips to garbage cages. Backwoods users should store their food in airtight storage containers like a barrel keeping it some distance away from their camp preferably by hanging it from a tree. Residents and farmers should remove all birdfeeders and pet-food, including dishes, put away their barbecues after use, and keep the picnic tables clear of food. Buildings should be secured by reinforcing windows and doors - if you can open it with a crowbar, it's not bear-proof.

A bear that is repeatedly exposed to humans at close range and is rewarded for its curiosity without experiencing negative consequences learns to tolerate people at these distances and becomes "human-habituated." Bears that are both "food-conditioned" and "human-habituated" are the most likely to cause problems, and may, on occasion, become brazen to gain access to human foods.

If you are having a problem with a bear, do not attempt to handle it yourself. Call your local conservation office for advice or assistance. The phone numbers can be obtained either on the back of the "Cottager's Handbook" or the "Hunting" guide. If it is an emergency and a resource officer cannot be reached, then call the local RCMP office.

When bears become nuisances, which for some people simply mean their presence, the public often demands their removal. Reactive "Out of sight, out of mind" programs do not resolve the problem because Translocated bears take with them the "bad" habits they've learned, which can then be applied in release-areas or in the capture-area upon their return. Not only does relocation offer limited success, because it is increasingly more difficult to find areas isolated from human activities, it can result in death due to stress, starvation, predation, intra-species strife, or other factors related to placing a bear in unfamiliar habitat. Unfortunately, a fed bear usually becomes a dead bear.

As long as non-natural food incentives remain, bears will exploit them, especially offspring of habituated family groups. Treating the consequence without addressing the cause perpetuates the cycle. People can reduce the need for destruction of bears by

handling food and garbage responsibly through the practice of good housekeeping principles – *Removing the Attractant, Removes the Bear.*

We are a generation raised with the fantasy notion that bears are charismatic and cuddly “Hollywood” and storybook characters. Unfortunately, these images are clouding our judgment with what is appropriate behaviour around bears. For those who intentionally feed and try getting close and personal with bears, fail to appreciate that bears can also be fierce predators capable of killing both wild and domestic animals and in the rare case, humans. The problem when one encounters a bear does not know where in the range of behaviour the bear they are encountering lies. One may come upon a bear that is willing to put up with you, while the next bear you happen upon bounds towards you in a half-ponce, half-lunge... slamming its paw against the ground and blowing explosively through its nostril because you invaded its personal space. Black bears needn't be feared, nor should they be dismissed as harmless. Bears deserve our respect for the danger they pose...

### **If You See a Bear...**

The dynamics of each individual encounter will command a particular response unique onto its own accepting that there are no guarantees of what works in one instance will work in another. In the collective opinion of experts, the following is recommended:

- **Stop, remain calm and assess** the situation, try and understand what message the bear is conveying before you act.
- **Never approach or crowd** a bear, even if it does not seem agitated. If you choose to do so, you should be prepared to defend yourself.
- **Never, never feed it!**
- **Never run** unless reaching safety is a guarantee! Fleeing may trigger a chase response. Bears can reach bursts of speed of 50 km/hr (30 m/hr) and can outrun a person going up or downhill.
- Climbing a tree or entering water is no guarantee of safety since black bears are superior climbers and stronger swimmers.
- Standing on its hind legs is seldom a precursor to an attack. The bear is trying to get a better look or smell at something it's uncertain of.
- Consider taking a walking stick and carrying pepper spray attached to your belt.
- If you are near a building or car, get inside.
- Keep dogs away, or on a leash. A poorly trained dog may excite a bear resulting in the bear following the dog back to its owner.
- If a bear is in a tree – leave it alone by vacating the area. When it feels safe, it will climb down and leave.

### **If a bear is *unaware* of you ...**

- Move away quietly when the bear is not looking toward you. Keep your eye on the bear, but do not make direct eye contact because the gaze may be interpreted as a challenge.

### **If a bear is *aware* of you ...**

- Let it know you are human. Talk to the bear in a low tone of voice and wave your arms slowly while moving away upwind, if practical, to give the bear your scent.

### **If a bear *approaches* ... “*Defensive*” situations**

The bear perceives you to be a threat - to it, its cubs, or it may be defending its food. These bears usually become stressed often giving visual and vocal cues like swatting or slamming its paw against the ground and blowing explosively through its nostrils. Other vocalizations may include: exhaling loudly, huffing, moaning or jaw-popping (snapping the teeth), or lowering the head with ears drawn back while facing you are all displays of aggression and are a bear's way of issuing a warning. Excessive salivation is a universal sign of nervousness. The response may escalate to an actual charge, usually a bluff where the bear stops and veers away before making contact.

### **Reacting to a “*defensive*” approach or charge ...**

- **STAND YOUR GROUND.** When the bear has stopped its advance, slowly back away, watching the bear through the corner of your eye and talking to it in a calm low-toned voice. Prepare your deterrent, such as bear spray, if you have any.

### **Reacting to a “*defensive*” attack ...**

- **FALL TO THE GROUND** immediately upon contact. Lay on your stomach with your legs spread slightly apart, locking your fingers behind your head. If the bear flips you over, roll back on your stomach to protect your vital organs and face.
- Do not struggle or cry out.
- When the attack is broken off, do not move or make a sound until you are sure the bear has left – if you do, the bear may resume the attack because it still feels threatened.

### **If a bear *approaches* ... “*Offensive*” situations**

If a bear has not been approached and is not stressed, one should interpret the advance to be “*offensive*” in nature – the bear either wants right of way, or wants to assert dominance, or it may be stalking you as possible prey, usually with the head up and ears erect.

- As a first response give the bear right of way by moving aside and watching the bear.
- If it continues to follow you, you may try dropping your pack and foodstuff, then slowly back away in a lateral direction keeping an eye on the bear.
- If the bear ignores your pack and continues to follow with its attention focused on you - **STOP, STAND YOUR GROUND.** If you are with others, stay together and act as a group. Make sure the bear has a clear escape route. Act aggressively to persuade the bear you are not easy prey. Stare it in the eye. Raise your jacket to look

bigger. Shout. Wave your arms. Stomp your feet. Slowly move uphill of it. Stand on a log or rock. Use an air-horn if available. Use your bear spray if within range.

### **Reacting to a “predatory” attack...**

- If the bear attacks silently without having displayed stress behaviour – **FIGHT BACK** with anything at hand. Grab a rock, a stout piece of wood, and a knife. Strike for the nose or eyes. Kick, yell, be ruthless – you are fighting for your life!

For black bears, “*defensive*” attacks are more infrequent than “*offensive*” attacks, and both are extremely rare.

Despite many bear-human encounters, bear attacks are infrequent, and cases of bear-inflicted deaths are even more rare. Stephen Herrero, author of “*Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*”, has documented 54 fatal maulings in North America between 1900 and 2004 with over half of the fatalities occurring since 1980 including 8 this century. In most cases, he concluded, “predaceous” bears preyed upon people. In Manitoba, there are only two records of a black-bear inflicted human fatality, despite thousands of encounters between people and bears. It’s unlikely that the victims did anything, deliberately or inadvertently, to trigger the attacks. A predaceous bear may simply have been the exception that chose a human as its prey. In other words, the victim may just have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. In 2003, there were 3 non-fatal attacks in Manitoba. Prior to that, the last recorded incident occurred in 1995.

First-time users of bear-spray repellents are encouraged to rehearse **dispensing** them in a controlled environment to become familiar with its range and dispersal pattern. It is preferred that people who are not trained in its use, not carry it for it may lull them into a false sense of security. Canisters should be carried on the person (not in the pack). Only canisters with the manufacture’s seal intact will ensure an effective discharge – usually 6 seconds for a 260ml can with an effective range of 3-4 metres (10-15 feet) and an upper limit of 7-8 metres (25 feet).

Black Bear Programs Manager  
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