

Be aware of bears

Tips to avoiding encounters or problems with black bears



The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the only bear species native to New Brunswick, and is found throughout the province's mainland.

Although bears live primarily in forested areas, they sometimes wander into urban areas. Conflicts between people and bears have increased as suburban sprawl encroaches into former bear habitat and as more people enter New Brunswick's woodlands to hike, camp or enjoy other activities.

Black bears are generally shy and usually avoid humans, but they are opportunistic feeders, and will attempt to eat anything that looks, smells or tastes like food. When natural foods such as nuts, berries, insects and tender vegetation are scarce, bears search actively for anything to eat. This is when they most often come in contact with people. Bears are intelligent animals with good memories, and if they find a food source, either natural or artificial, they will return in hopes of another meal. Anything that people or their pets eat will attract bears.

Bears and you

Although black bear attacks are extremely rare, people need to realize that bears are large, wild animals that command our respect. A male black bear, for example, can weigh as much as 300 kilograms.

Usually, though, black bears are wary of people, and will leave an area when encountered.

Bears can become a nuisance when they visit homes, cottages, campgrounds and businesses. Although some bears become used to people, they remain wild animals no matter how tame they may appear. People must always be cautious around them, since they may react unpredictably.

Avoiding and solving bear problems

People have the responsibility of avoiding conflicts with bears. Learning effective measures to prevent bear problems will help both bears and people. The best way to avoid problems is to not attract bears in the first place.

The following measures will help prevent bear problems around the home, cottage, and business, and when camping or hiking in the woods.

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At your home, cottage or business

Bears are attracted to homes, cottages and businesses mainly by garbage and bird feeders. Pet food, charcoal grills, fruit trees and gardens also attract them. Once a bear finds food around your home, it will likely return.

You should never feed a bear, as the animal will then associate people with food, and may become a problem. Once a bear becomes accustomed to receiving food from people its aggressiveness can lead to personal injuries or property damage. Once this occurs, the animal is either relocated to an unfamiliar environment where its chance of survival decreases, or it is destroyed.

To minimize bear problems on your property:

- reduce garbage odours. Rinse food cans and wrappers before disposal;
- do not leave pet food outside;
- compost only vegetable scraps; never compose meat or fish;
- keep odorous scraps such as meat and fish in your freezer until garbage pickup day;
- wash garbage cans regularly, and use lime or baking soda to reduce odours;
- keep garbage cans in a bear-proof container or in a closed garage until the morning of pickup;
- remove bird feeders (especially those with suet) by early April, as bears come out of hibernation in spring and are particularly hungry;
- keep barbecue grills and picnic tables clean; and
- use energized electric fencing to keep bears out of beehives, gardens, fruit trees and berry patches.

Note: these tips on pet food, bird feeders and garbage handling are also effective in reducing problems with raccoons, skunks, coyotes and foxes, which are a more common nuisance than bears.

Remember: the presence of barking dogs, bright lights and noisemakers will sometimes discourage bears from coming into an area.

If a bear does come into your yard, don't panic. Don't shoot it, and don't approach it.

Wildlife experts say that we need to learn to tolerate and live with bears. Many bears are killed or injured when not causing problems; sometimes they are simply travelling through an area.

Most bears fear people, and will leave when they see you. However, if a bear woofs, snaps its jaws, slaps the ground or brush, or bluff charges, then you are too close. If you find yourself in this situation, back away slowly, go inside and wait for the bear to leave. If you have a dog, do not let it outside.

If a bear refuses to leave:

- make loud noises, or throw something to scare it away; and
- always allow it an escape route.

If a bear is in a tree:

- leave it alone. The bear will usually go away when it feels safe;
- have people leave the area; and
- remove your dog from the area.

At your campsite



You may encounter a bear when outdoors, especially while camping. If you do, remain calm — do not panic.

Seeing bears can be enjoyable, and should be viewed as an opportunity to see one of New Brunswick's more secretive wildlife species. Most black bears have an instinctive fear of humans, and once aware of your presence, they will quickly leave the area. Having a bear in camp, however, can lead to problems. If a problem becomes serious, the bear may have to be killed unnecessarily.

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To reduce the chances of bear problems while camping:

- move to another campsite if fresh signs of a bear are present;
- separate cooking/eating and sleeping areas if you are camping with only a sleeping bag or tent;
- never have food in your tent;
- use canned and dried foods to minimize food odours;
- store food out of a bear's reach by hanging it at least three metres above ground between two trees, or store it in the trunk of a car;
- use air-tight or bear-proof containers to store food;
- burn waste paper in your campfire;
- do not burn or bury food scraps; and
- remove all garbage and fish remains from camp every evening.

If you are at a campground where trash is collected at each site, all food scraps should be stored inside your vehicle following the last pickup of the day.

If a bear comes into camp:

- do not feed it;
- scare it away by making loud noises, banging pans, yelling, or using an air horn;
- don't be gentle — chase it away; and
- throw rocks or pieces of firewood, or use a slingshot.

Bears may make threatening sounds, stand upright or possibly bluff charge. These actions are signs that you are too close. Bluff charges can be unnerving. However, it is rare that a bear cannot be chased away.

Bears feel threatened if suddenly surprised, but most will leave if they are aware of human presence in the vicinity.



Hiking or other outdoor activities

To avoid bear encounters in the woods:

- stay alert when hiking, and watch the trail ahead;
- carry noisemakers such as bells or cans with rocks inside;
- hike in a group whenever possible;
- avoid food sources such as berry patches;
- be especially alert when travelling during strong, gusting winds, as most animals will not be able to hear or smell you in advance;
- keep all dogs on a leash. Sometimes dogs chase bears, but the dog may also run back to its owner with the bear in pursuit;
- always keep young children within sight when hiking or picking berries. With their small size and high-pitched voices, children are a curiosity to many animals, and are not as intimidating as adult humans.
- don't get too close if trying to photograph bears. Use a telephoto lens;
- try and maintain a distance of at least 100 metres between yourself and any bear you may see. Don't try to approach any closer; and
- never approach a bear cub that appears abandoned. The mother is likely nearby.

If a black bear approaches you:

- do not play dead. Playing dead may work well when dealing with female grizzly bears with cubs, but is not effective and should never be used with black bears;
- speak in a loud voice so that the bear recognizes you as a human;

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- back slowly away, and do not turn your back. Keep the bear in sight without making direct eye contact;
- when you are alone, raise your arms over your head and slowly wave them to appear larger and more intimidating;
- stay together if you are part of a group. Do not spread out;
- throw rocks or sticks at the animal;
- do not climb a tree, as all but the heaviest black bears can easily climb almost any tree. The climbing action may also make the bear think that you are another bear;
- seek shelter in any nearby camp or vehicle; and
- stand your ground if the bear charges you. Almost all charges are bluffs, and the animal will usually veer off before it reaches you. Bluff charges are quite common if you get too close to a female with cubs.

Remember: a bear standing on its hind legs is not a sign of aggression. Bears simply stand to see and smell better. It is usually a sign that the animal has not yet identified you.

If the bear makes physical contact with you, fight back aggressively. Use whatever object is available to hit the animal on the nose or in the eyes. Do not play dead, as your survival may depend on fighting back.

While physical encounters with black bears are extremely rare, some people may feel more comfortable knowing that they have some type of defensive weapon. The only universally recommended items for defence are spray repellents. Spray repellents containing capsaicin are commercially available, are effective, and will not injure the bear's eyes or make it aggressive. Caution must be taken when using these products, though, so be sure to follow the instructions on the label.

Anyone who encounters an aggressive bear, has a recurring or persistent nuisance problem, or suffers property damage from a black bear is advised to contact the local office of the Department of Natural Resources. A list of office locations and contact information may be found at www.gnb.ca/naturalresources

